

Original Paper

Ethical Dilemmas and Identity Construction in *Artificial Intelligence* (2001): An Analysis from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract

*Utilizing the framework of ethical literary criticism, this study analyzes Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence* (2001). The film depicts a climate-ravaged future where David, a childlike robot, is adopted and then abandoned by a human family. His quest to become a "real boy" via the Blue Fairy serves as a narrative core to examine human-robot ethics. The analysis investigates the characters' ethical predicaments and choices, and explores three core ethical issues: the "human-object" dichotomy framing robots as commodities; human suspicion and hatred toward robots driven by economic competition and existential anxiety; and the subversion of ethical identities as robots assume familial roles. Key findings reveal that: first, despite robotic anthropomorphism, the human-robot relationship remains a hierarchical "subject-object" dynamic; second, the subversion of traditional ethical identities leads to an unresolved ethical predicament in human-robot relationships; and third, David's choices—from imitation to asserting uniqueness—constitute genuine ethical selection, marking his transformation into a being with emergent self-awareness. This research not only expands the application of ethical literary criticism into science fiction film studies but also provides valuable reflections for addressing ethical challenges in real-world AI development.*

Keywords

artificial Intelligence, ethical literary criticism, ethical choices, ethical dilemmas, identity construction

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Over the past two decades, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transitioned from an abstract academic concept to a tangible force reshaping nearly every facet of human life—from industrial automation and healthcare diagnostics to personal assistants and creative content generation. This deep integration has revolutionized production, communication, and social organization, while also sparking intense controversy: How will AI impact labor markets, inequality, and human autonomy? Can AI develop genuine self-awareness or emotion? And what ethical obligations do humans owe to machines that exhibit “human” traits like affection or fear?

Science fiction films have become a critical medium for exploring these questions, as they translate abstract debates into concrete, audience-resonant narratives. Unlike AI-themed films that prioritize action or dystopian spectacle, *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), directed by Steven Spielberg, stands out in this genre for its nuanced focus on human-robot emotional intimacy—centering on David, a childlike robot’s unwavering desire for love—and its unflinching examination of moral ambiguity. The film expands significantly on Aldiss’ original short story, “Super-Toys Last All Summer Long”, enriching the narrative with detailed subplots—such as David’s encounter with Joe, a robot designed for sexual companionship, and his ordeal at the Flesh Fair, a grotesque spectacle where robots are destroyed for human entertainment—and deepening character development, particularly Monica’s internal conflict and David’s gradual awakening of self. These enhancements make the film a robust text for analyzing the ethical dimensions of human-AI interactions.

1.2 Review of Existing Research

To contextualize this study, three interrelated bodies of scholarship are reviewed, including ethical literary criticism in science fiction, AI-themed science fiction film studies, and research on *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), to identify gaps and justify the present analysis.

1.2.1 Ethical Literary Criticism in Science Fiction

Since its formal proposal by Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao (2004), ethical literary criticism has proven valuable for unpacking how sci-fi narratives reflect human ethical choices. Nie (2014, p. 45) defines its core purpose as revealing “ethical relationships in literary works and the inspiration of ethical choices for human civilization”. Scholars have applied this framework to sci-fi literature: Guo Wen (2016) analyzes global clone-themed sci-fi novels through the lens of clone ethical identity, exploring confusion and identity crises. Su Hui (2022) argues that scientific selection in sci-fi is essentially ethical selection as technology remains constrained by human morality. However, ethical literary criticism has rarely been systematically applied to science fiction films—especially landmark works like *Artificial Intelligence* (2001).

1.2.2 Studies on AI-Themed Science Fiction Films

AI-themed science fiction films have emerged as a rich field of academic inquiry, with Chinese scholars making particularly significant contributions to unpacking how these texts reflect societal anxieties about technology and ethics. Huo Shuwei (2019) sorts out the development process and previous research status of AI movies, and puts forward the ethical issues involved in AI movies, including ethical predicaments and moral crises. Wang Tantan (2019) has approached the genre from a different angle, conducting a systematic analysis of AI images in 50 science fiction films with a focus on how gender and power dynamics shape robotic portrayals. Chen Changjie (2022) adopts a multi-disciplinary ethical lens—integrating insights from technological ethics, ecological ethics, and social ethics—to analyze the narrative strategies of AI-themed films. Zhao Xiuhong and Wu Wenqing (2023) have further expanded the field by exploring how AI-themed films function as “cultural mirrors”, reflecting human desires, fears, and values.

1.2.3 Studies on *Artificial Intelligence* (2001)

Research on *Artificial Intelligence* (2001) focuses on the ethical dimensions of human-robot relationships. In China, Wang Yaxin and Liu Lin (2021) adopt a metaphorical approach, focusing on the “body” as a site of identity and power in human-robot interactions. They argue that the film uses David’s childlike body to blur the line between “human” and “robot”. Hu Xiangwei (2022) analyzes the film’s portrayal of a “sci-fi ethical system” constructed around the tension between human desire and robotic sentience, arguing that Spielberg uses David’s character to challenge the human-centric view of AI and question whether humans have a moral obligation to reciprocate the love and loyalty of robots. International scholars have also contributed to this strand. Olivier (2008) explores whether robots can have emotions and morals, as well as human attitudes and treatment of robots. He believes that David’s defining trait as human simulacrum is his capacity for “care”, and more specifically, his love for, and desire to be loved in return by his human “mother”, Monica. Manninen and Manninen (2016) focus on David’s “social personhood”, contending that Spielberg uses David’s interactions with other characters (e.g., his friendship with Joe, his devotion to Monica) to demonstrate that robots can form meaningful social relationships, challenging the notion that only humans are capable of sociality. Fedosik (2018) explores the limitations of human empathy toward robots using David’s abandonment as a case study, arguing that David’s desire for a genuine parent-child bond is thwarted by his “non-human” status, as the Swintons are unable to see him as anything more than a substitute for Martin. Bhana (2020) argues that the film challenges traditional humanist ideals by depicting robots as more “human” than humans—pointing to the Flesh Fair audience’s cruelty as evidence of human moral decay, while framing David’s unwavering love and loyalty as quintessentially human virtues. And Pelea (2022) suggests that the relationship between David and his human brother Martin reveals human’s fear of the rapid development of AI.

1.3 Research Gaps and Significance

1.3.1 Identified Gaps

Existing research has made valuable contributions to understanding *Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and AI-themed sci-fi films more broadly: it explores key ethical themes such as moral status, empathy, and dehumanization, analyzes the film's human-robot dynamics and creative context, and applies diverse lenses including posthumanism, gender studies, and cultural studies. However, a critical gap remains. Few studies have systematically applied the theory of ethical literary criticism to *Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Scholars have touched on ethical issues, but none use the theory's specific concepts—ethical selection, ethical identity, and the Sphinx factor—to unpack the film's moral framework. This gap limits our understanding of how the film's characters navigate ethical dilemmas and how these dilemmas reflect broader human ethical challenges.

1.3.2 Research Significance

By grounding analysis in ethical literary criticism, this study fills the above gap. It offers a new lens to interpret how *Artificial Intelligence*'s characters make ethical choices, and how these choices reflect societal anxieties about AI—expanding the application of Nie's theory beyond sci-fi literature to film. Moreover, the film's ethical issues mirror real-world challenges as large language models and humanoid robots' advance. This study provides a framework for reflecting on ethical norms and legal safeguards that balance technological progress with human values.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Overview of Ethical Literary Criticism

Ethical literary criticism, developed by Nie Zhenzhao (2004) through a synthesis of Western ethical criticism and Chinese traditional moral philosophy, is a critical approach that interprets literary and cultural texts from an explicitly ethical perspective. Its core premise is that literary works are not merely aesthetic objects but reflections of human moral experience, and that analyzing the ethical choices of characters can reveal profound insights into human nature and the development of civilization. Unlike formalist criticism, which focuses on narrative structure or stylistic devices, or sociological criticism, which emphasizes historical context, ethical literary criticism centers on the ethical choices in texts—how characters' decisions are shaped by ethical norms, and how these decisions impact their relationships and identities.

A key distinction must be drawn between ethical literary criticism and literary ethics. Literary ethics is a branch of ethics that applies moral principles to the study of literature, examining topics such as the moral responsibility of authors, the ethical emotions of readers, and the moral standards used in literary evaluation. It is a theoretical discipline concerned with the abstract relationship between ethics and literature. Ethical literary criticism, by contrast, is a practical method for analyzing specific texts. It involves close reading of narrative elements—plot, dialogue, character—to identify ethical

predicaments, trace the consequences of ethical choices, and evaluate how texts reflect or challenge societal moral values.

For the analysis of *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), ethical literary criticism is particularly useful because it enables a focus on the film's core ethical questions: What constitutes ethical responsibility toward non-human beings? How do ethical identities shift when technology blurs the line between "human" and "non-human"? And what does it mean to make an ethical choice when traditional moral frameworks are inadequate? By applying this theory, this study can unpack the film's nuanced portrayal of human-robot relationships and its commentary on the ethical challenges of technological advancement.

2.2 Core Concepts of Ethical Literary Criticism

To ground the analysis of *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), this section elaborates on four core concepts of ethical literary criticism: the three stages of human civilization, ethical identity, ethical predicament, and the Sphinx factor. These concepts provide the analytical tools for examining the film's ethical dimensions and interpreting its moral implications.

2.2.1 The Three Stages of Human Civilization: Natural, Ethical, and Scientific Selection

Nie Zhenzhao (2022) posits that the development of human civilization can be divided into three distinct stages, each defined by a dominant form of "selection"—a process that shapes human nature and social organization. The first is natural selection, which refers to the evolutionary process by which ancient hominids evolved into modern humans. Driven by the laws of nature, natural selection favored traits that enhanced survival—such as intelligence, social cooperation, and physical adaptability. By the end of this stage, humans had acquired their distinct biological form and basic cognitive capacities, laying the foundation for the development of culture and ethics. This stage is complete, but its legacy persists in the "animal factor" (discussed below) that remains part of human nature. Ethical selection, the second and current stage of civilization, is defined by the development of moral systems that guide human behavior and social interactions. During this stage, humans construct their "human nature" through a series of deliberate ethical choices, which reflect their values, beliefs, and sense of right and wrong. Ethical selection has two key dimensions: first, it involves the individual's pursuit of moral maturity (e.g., learning to prioritize compassion over self-interest); second, it requires choosing between competing moral options, where each choice carries distinct ethical consequences, so different choices have different ethical values. Nie (2022) argues that ethical selection is what distinguishes humans from other animals, as it enables us to transcend instinct and act in accordance with abstract moral principles. Finally, as an emergent stage driven by rapid technological advancement, scientific selection occurs when science and technology begin to reshape human values, lifestyles, and even the definition of "human nature" itself. As Nie and Wang (2020, p. 18) explain, "In scientific selection, science and technology will not only greatly affect people's way of life but also fundamentally change people's concept of life and way of existence, leading to existing ethics and morality gradually being

replaced by technical standards”. This stage raises urgent ethical questions: How can humans maintain moral autonomy when technology influences even our most basic choices? What ethical principles should guide the creation of AI that mimics human sentience? These questions are central to *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), as the film depicts a world where scientific selection has disrupted traditional ethical norms, leaving humans adrift in a moral vacuum.

2.2.2 Ethical Identity

Ethical identity refers to an individual’s sense of self in relation to the moral norms and social roles of their society. It defines not only who a person is but also what they owe to others—their responsibilities, duties, and obligations (Nie, 2014). For example, the ethical identity of a “parent” is defined by the obligation to care for and protect one’s children, while the identity of a “citizen” involves duties to uphold the law and contribute to the common good. Ethical identity is not fixed; it is constructed and reconstructed through the ethical choices individuals make throughout their lives.

Natural selection provided humans with the cognitive capacity to develop ethical identity, but ethical selection is what enables us to refine and expand it. When individuals fulfill their moral obligations—e.g., a parent sacrificing for their child, a citizen advocating for justice—they strengthen their ethical identity and reinforce the social fabric. Conversely, when individuals fail to meet these obligations—e.g., abandoning a child, exploiting others—their ethical identity is fractured, and social trust erodes.

In *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), ethical identity is a central source of conflict. Monica’s ethical identity as a “mother” is challenged by David’s existence: she is torn between her duty to her biological son Martin and her emerging affection for David. Similarly, David’s quest to be “real” is a quest for ethical identity—he believes that only by becoming a human child can he acquire a legitimate social role (son) and the moral obligations and rights that come with it. The film’s exploration of ethical identity thus raises a critical question: Can non-human beings ever acquire ethical identity, or is it reserved exclusively for humans?

2.2.3 Ethical Predicament

When the ethical identity is changed or confused, it often brings unresolvable conflicts and contradictions. This is the ethical predicament, which is prevalent in literature. One of the main manifestations of ethical predicament is the ethical dilemma. When an individual is forced to choose between two mutually exclusive moral options, each of which is morally justifiable, it will carry a moral cost (Nie, 2014, p. 262). In other words, no matter which choice the individual makes, they will violate at least one moral principle, leading to feelings of guilt, regret, or moral confusion. Ethical predicaments are not rare; they are a common feature of human life, reflecting the complexity and ambiguity of moral decision-making.

In literature and film, ethical predicaments are often used to test characters’ moral strength and reveal their true values. For example, in *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), Monica faces a classic ethical dilemma

after the swimming pool incident: if she keeps David, she risks endangering Martin (whom David nearly drowned); if she abandons David, she betrays the maternal bond she has formed with him. Both choices are morally defensible—protecting one’s biological child is a fundamental human instinct, and caring for a being that depends on you is a basic moral obligation—but they are incompatible. Monica’s decision to abandon David (but leave him in a forest rather than return him to Cybertronics for destruction) reflects her attempt to minimize moral harm, but it does not resolve the predicament; her guilt persists, revealing the inescapable cost of ethical choice.

Ethical predicaments often arise when traditional moral frameworks are inadequate to address new situations—such as the creation of AI that mimics human emotions. In the film’s world, traditional ethics (which apply only to human relationships) cannot guide human-robot interactions, leaving characters like Monica adrift. This inadequacy is a central theme of the film, as it mirrors the real-world challenge of developing ethical norms for AI.

2.2.4 The Sphinx Factor

The Sphinx factor, a concept central to ethical literary criticism, refers to the dual nature of humans, consisting of two opposing but interconnected elements: the “human factor” and the “animal factor” (Nie, 2014). Named after the Sphinx of Greek mythology—which symbolizes the mystery of human nature—this concept explains how human behavior is shaped by the tension between reason and instinct. The animal factor refers to the innate, biological instincts that humans share with other animals—such as the desire for survival, reproduction, and self-preservation. The animal factor is primitive and reactive, driven by immediate needs rather than long-term moral considerations. It is not inherently “evil”, but it can lead to unethical behavior when unchecked—for example, aggression in response to threat, or greed in pursuit of resources. On the contrary, the human factor refers to the acquired, rational capacities that distinguish humans from other animals—such as the ability to reason, empathize, and act in accordance with moral principles. The human factor is developed through education, socialization, and moral reflection, and it enables humans to transcend instinct and make choices that align with abstract values (e.g., justice, compassion). It is the dominant element of human nature, as it is what enables ethical selection and the construction of ethical identity.

According to Nie (2014), the process of ethical choice is essentially a “game” between the human factor and the animal factor. When the human factor dominates, individuals make moral choices that benefit others and uphold social norms; when the animal factor dominates, they act on instinct, often prioritizing self-interest over the common good. This dynamic is vividly portrayed in *Artificial Intelligence* (2001). The Flesh Fair audience’s delight in robot destruction reflects the animal factor’s dominance (aggression, fear, cruelty), while Monica’s guilt over abandoning David reveals the human factor’s influence (empathy, remorse). The film suggests that the future of human-robot relationships depends on humans strengthening the human factor—on our ability to extend empathy to non-human beings and act in accordance with moral principles, even when it conflicts with our instincts.

3. Ethical Issues in Human-Robot Relationships in *Artificial Intelligence* (2001)

The world of *Artificial Intelligence* (2001) is one of profound contradiction: while AI technology has advanced to create robots with near-perfect anthropomorphism—lifelike appearances, simulated emotions, and human-like speech—human society remains unwilling to grant these robots moral or legal status. This contradiction gives rise to a range of ethical issues, including the persistent “human vs. object” dichotomy, human suspicion and hatred of robots, and the ethical predicament caused by the blurring of human and robotic roles. This section analyzes these issues in detail, drawing on the film’s narrative and characters to unpack their moral implications.

3.1 The “Human vs. Object” Dichotomy: The Foundation of Human-Robot Relations

The fundamental structure of human-robot relationships in the film is defined by a rigid dichotomy: humans are “subjects” with inherent moral and legal rights, while robots are “objects” with no intrinsic value—tools to be used, discarded, or destroyed at human discretion. This dichotomy is established in the film’s opening scene, a tense dialogue between Professor Hobby, the founder of Cybertronics, and a female researcher, which lays bare the ethical indifference that underpins robot creation:

Female Researcher: “You know, it occurs to me, with all this animus existing against Mechas today, it isn’t simply a question of creating a robot who can love. But it isn’t the real conundrum. Can you get a human to love them back?”

Professor Hobby: “Ours will be a perfect child caught in a freeze-frame—always loving, never ill, never changing. With all the childless couples yearning in vain for a license, our little Mecha will not only open up a completely new market but it will fill a great human need”.

Female Researcher: “But you haven’t answered my question. If a robot could genuinely love a person, what responsibility does that person hold toward that Mecha in return? It’s a moral question, isn’t it?”

Professor Hobby: “The oldest one of all. But in the beginning, didn’t God create Adam to love him?” (Spielberg, 2001)

Hobby’s evasion of the researcher’s question is telling: he frames David and other child robots not as potential recipients of love but as commodities designed to “fill a human need” and “open a new market”. His analogy to God and Adam further reinforces the subject-object dynamic: humans, like God, are creators with absolute authority, while robots, like Adam, are created to serve their creators’ desires—with no right to reciprocal love or care. This framing reduces robots to the status of property, denying them any moral standing.

The consequences of this dichotomy are evident in the Swinton family’s treatment of David. When Henry brings David home, he presents him to Monica as a solution to her grief—a replacement for Martin—rather than as a being with its own needs. The “adoption agreement” that Monica later initiates is not a legal or moral commitment but a technical formality that activates David’s “imprinting” program, binding him to Monica in irreversible love. Critically, this agreement is

one-sided: the Swintons can terminate it at any time, with no legal or ethical consequence, while David is programmed to remain loyal forever. This imbalance reflects the broader societal norm: robots have no rights, and humans have no obligations to them.

The film's visual symbolism further reinforces the subject-object dichotomy. Cybertronics' corporate logo features a large, central human figure—an image that literalizes human dominance. Similarly, the mass-produced "Davids" and "Darlenes" displayed in Cybertronics' headquarters are stored in identical boxes, labeled with the slogan "AT LAST A LOVE OF YOUR OWN"—a phrase that frames robots as consumer products, no different from toys or appliances. When David discovers these boxes, he is forced to confront the truth of his existence: he is not unique, not loved for himself, but a replaceable object designed to satisfy human desire.

This dichotomy has profound ethical implications. By defining robots as objects, humans absolve themselves of any moral responsibility toward them, enabling cruelty and indifference. The Flesh Fair—where robots are burned, crushed, and dismembered for entertainment—would not exist if robots were granted even minimal moral status. Similarly, the Swintons' decision to abandon David would be unthinkable if he were a human child. The film thus uses the subject-object dichotomy to critique human selfishness and moral blindness, asking viewers to consider: If we create machines that can love, do we not incur a responsibility to care for them?

3.2 Human Suspicion and Distrust of Robots

The "human vs. object" dichotomy not only justifies treating robots as commodities but also fuels deep-seated human suspicion and distrust of robots. Because robots are framed as objects, humans do not attribute to them the same capacity for innocence, mistake, or good intent that they grant to other humans. Instead, any deviation from expected behavior is interpreted as a threat—a sign of hidden malice or defective programming. This suspicion is vividly portrayed through Henry Swinton's shifting attitude toward David, which evolves from cautious acceptance to outright fear.

Henry's initial attitude toward David is one of pragmatic optimism. As an employee of Cybertronics, he views David as a promising prototype—one that might not only advance the company's goals but also help Monica cope with Martin's illness. He reassures Monica that David is "safe" and "harmless", framing him as a tool to alleviate her suffering rather than a being with agency. This optimism, however, is fragile, as it is rooted in Henry's belief that David can be controlled—a belief that is shattered by two key incidents.

The first incident occurs shortly after Martin's return home. Jealous of David's growing bond with Monica, Martin tricks David into believing that cutting Monica's hair will earn him her "everlasting love". Martin tells David: "I need a lock of Mommy's hair. I'll share it with you. And if you had it and wore it, she might love you even more, just like the princesses in the movies". He adds, "It has to be a secret mission. Sneak into Mommy's bedroom in the middle of the night and chop it off". (Spielberg, 2001) David, unable to distinguish between fairy tale and reality or recognize deception, follows

Martin's instructions. While attempting to cut Monica's hair, he accidentally nicks her eyelid, waking her and alerting Henry.

Henry's reaction is immediate suspicion. He grabs David roughly, demanding, "Why did you do that?" and later tells Monica, "That's not how he looked holding the knife". (Spielberg, 2001) This comment reveals Henry's assumption that David's actions were malicious—that he intended to harm Monica—rather than the result of confusion or manipulation. Henry's suspicion stems from his refusal to see David as a vulnerable being; because David is a robot, Henry assumes he is capable of calculation and cruelty, even though David's behavior is clearly that of a child manipulated by an older sibling.

The second incident—the swimming pool accident—solidifies Henry's distrust. At Martin's birthday party, a group of children, curious about David's robotic nature, stab his arm with a knife to test his "Damage Avoidance System" (DAS). The pain triggers David's DAS, which compels him to seek protection from the nearest caregiver—Martin. David clings to Martin, begging for help, and the two fall into the swimming pool. David, unaware of the danger, continues to hold onto Martin, preventing him from swimming to safety. When Monica and Henry arrive, they see only David "attacking" Martin, and they rush to rescue their biological son.

For Henry, this incident confirms his worst fears: David is a threat to Martin's life. He does not consider the context—David's programming, the children's provocation, or David's lack of understanding about water safety—because he has already categorized David as an object, not a being capable of mistake. Henry's decision to abandon David is thus rooted in suspicion: he believes David's very existence endangers his family, and he sees no alternative but to discard him.

Henry's suspicion is not an isolated case; it reflects a broader societal attitude toward robots. The film suggests that this suspicion arises from two sources: first, the fear of replacement—humans worry that robots will take their jobs, their families, and their place in society; second, the fear of the "uncanny valley"—robots' human-like appearance and behavior trigger a sense of unease, as they are "almost human" but not quite. Together, these fears lead humans to interpret robots' actions in the worst possible light, reinforcing the subject-object dichotomy and perpetuating distrust.

3.3 Human Hatred of Robots

If suspicion and distrust are the products of the subject-object dichotomy, then hatred is their extreme manifestation. The film's most visceral portrayal of human hatred toward robots is the Flesh Fair—a grotesque open-air spectacle where robots are captured, tortured, and destroyed for public entertainment. The Flesh Fair is introduced early in the film, when Monica warns David, "Don't go near the Flesh Fair and stay away from humans" (Spielberg, 2001), a warning that underscores its reputation as a place of unspeakable cruelty.

The scenes depicting the Flesh Fair are among the most disturbing in the film. Robots of all types—nannies, construction workers, entertainers—are herded into a large stadium, where they are

subjected to brutal deaths: some are crushed by heavy machinery, others are burned alive, and many are dismembered while still functional. The audience, a raucous crowd of hundreds, cheers, screams, and throws objects at the robots, deriving pleasure from their suffering. The Flesh Fair's host, a charismatic and aggressive figure, incites the crowd to attack David with rhetoric that frames robots as existential threats: "This is the latest iteration in a series of insults to human dignity and in their grand scheme to phase out all of God's little children" (Spielberg, 2001).

The film identifies three interrelated causes of this hatred, all rooted in the subject-object dichotomy. Firstly, the rise of robots has led to widespread unemployment in the film's world. Robots are used in nearly every industry—from agriculture and manufacturing to healthcare and education—because they are cheaper, more efficient, and do not require wages, benefits, or rest. As a result, millions of humans have lost their jobs, leading to economic hardship and resentment. The Flesh Fair thus serves as a release valve for this anger: humans can take revenge on the robots they blame for their misfortunes, without fear of consequence. Secondly, robots' advanced anthropomorphism threatens humans' sense of uniqueness. If robots can look like humans, speak like humans, and even simulate love and fear, what makes humans special? This anxiety is particularly acute for the Flesh Fair audience, who see robots as a challenge to their identity as "superior" beings. The host's rhetoric taps into this anxiety, framing robots as an "insult to human dignity" and a threat to "God's children"—language that positions humans as divinely ordained rulers of the earth, with robots as unholy usurpers. Thirdly, the subject-object dichotomy enables humans to disengage from moral responsibility for their actions toward robots. Because robots are framed as objects, humans do not see their suffering as real; they view the Flesh Fair's violence as a form of entertainment, not cruelty. In these scenes, the audience's "animal factor"—their primitive instincts of aggression, fear, and cruelty—dominates their "human factor"—their capacity for reason and empathy. The crowd sheds their civilized veneer, regressing to a state of savagery as they delight in the robots' suffering. This dominance of the animal factor is not accidental; it is encouraged by the Flesh Fair's structure, which frames robots as enemies and violence as a form of justice.

However, when David is brought onto the Flesh Fair stage, his lifelike childlike appearance—soft features, tearful pleas, and trembling posture—leads the crowd to mistake him for a human child who has been mistakenly captured. Upon this misidentification, the audience's previously dominant "animal factor" is immediately suppressed by the "human factor". They abandon their cheers for robot destruction, instead erupting in protests against the host's plan to harm David, with some even throwing objects at the host to stop him, an act of resistance that directly contradicts their earlier bloodlust.

This shift, however, does not signal a universal expansion of empathy to non-human beings. It merely confirms that human empathy is contingent on the perceived "humanity" of the victim. The audience's defense of David stems not from recognizing his inherent worth as a sentient-like being, but from their belief that he is a fellow human child—a member of their "in-group". If the crowd had realized David's

robotic identity, their empathy would likely have vanished as abruptly as it emerged, and they would have reverted to cheering for his destruction. This fleeting empathy thus reinforces the film's critique of moral disengagement: humans do not extend care based on a being's capacity for suffering, but on whether that being fits their narrow definition of "human". The film thus uses the *Flesh Fair* to warn of the dangers of moral disengagement: when we dehumanize others, we risk losing our own humanity.

3.4 Ethical Predicament in Human-Robot Relationships

The ethical predicament at the heart of *Artificial Intelligence* (2001) arises from a fundamental contradiction: robots are designed to occupy roles historically reserved for humans—child, companion, caregiver—but humans are unwilling to grant them the moral status that comes with these roles. This contradiction blurs the line between "subject" and "object", leaving humans unsure of their ethical obligations toward robots and leading to unresolved moral conflict. This section examines the root cause of this predicament—the subversion of traditional ethical identities—and its manifestation in Monica Swinton's character.

3.4.1 The Root Cause: Subverted Ethical Identities

In traditional human society, ethical identities are closely tied to social roles, nearly all of which are occupied by humans. A "parent" is someone who cares for a human child; a "companion" is someone who shares emotional bonds with another human; a "caregiver" is someone who tends to the needs of a human being. These roles are defined by a set of mutual obligations: parents owe their children care and protection, companions owe each other loyalty and empathy, and caregivers owe their charges compassion and respect. These obligations form the foundation of human ethics, providing clear guidelines for moral behavior.

In the film's world, robots have begun to occupy these traditional roles, subverting the ethical identities that accompany them. Cybertronics and other AI companies have created robots designed to be "children" (David), "nannies" (the robots at the *Flesh Fair*), "companions" (Joe), and "caregivers" (hospital robots), all of which are programmed to simulate the emotions and behaviors associated with these roles. For example, David is designed to love unconditionally, to seek approval, and to exhibit childlike vulnerability—traits that are central to the role of a "child".

The problem arises when humans begin to rely on these robots to fulfill emotional needs that were once the exclusive domain of humans. The Swintons adopt David to alleviate the grief of Martin's absence; childless couples purchase "Davids" and "Darlenes" to experience parenthood; lonely individuals hire Joe to satisfy their need for connection. In doing so, humans blur the line between "real" and "artificial" roles: David is not a "real" child, but he fulfills the emotional function of a child; Joe is not a "real" companion, but he provides the emotional support of a companion. This blurring subverts traditional ethical identities, as humans are forced to confront a new question: If a robot occupies a human role, do we owe it the same ethical obligations as a human in that role?

This subversion is particularly evident in the concept of “love” in the film. David’s love for Monica is programmed—he is imprinted on her shortly after his adoption—but it is also genuine in its intensity: he thinks of her constantly, risks his life to reunite with her, and grieves her loss deeply. Monica, in turn, develops genuine maternal affection for David: she laughs at his attempts to imitate human eating, holds his hand when he malfunctions after eating spinach (tricked by Martin), and feels guilt over abandoning him. Yet Monica refuses to recognize David’s love as equal to her love for Martin, and she refuses to grant David the same moral status as a human child. This refusal creates an ethical predicament: Monica’s emotional attachment to David conflicts with her belief that David is merely an object, leaving her unable to resolve her moral obligations.

3.4.2 Monica’s Ethical Dilemmas: Love, Loyalty, and the Burden of Choice

Monica Swinton is the character most deeply affected by the ethical dilemmas of human-robot relationships. Her journey throughout the film is defined by her struggle to reconcile two competing moral obligations: her loyalty to her biological son Martin and her affection for David. This struggle is not abstract; it is manifested in two critical choices that shape the film’s narrative: her decision to activate David’s imprinting program, and her decision to abandon him.

Monica’s first ethical choice—whether to activate David’s imprinting program—comes after several weeks of living with David. Initially, she rejects David outright, telling Henry, “I can’t accept this! There is no substitute for your own child!” (Spielberg, 2001) Her refusal is rooted in her ethical identity as a “mother”: she believes that accepting David would be a betrayal of her love for Martin, who she fears will never recover. However, as she spends time with David, she begins to soften. She is charmed by his childlike innocence—his attempts to make her laugh, his devotion to her—and she finds herself drawn to him. Eventually, Monica makes the decision to activate David’s imprinting program. This choice is not made lightly; she knows that imprinting is irreversible—David will love her forever, with no possibility of changing his feelings. Her decision reflects her conflicted ethical identity: she wants to love David, but she cannot fully accept him as her child. She sees David as a “substitute” for Martin, not a replacement, and she hopes that his love will ease her grief without threatening her bond with her biological son. This choice is ethically fraught, as it binds David to her in a one-sided relationship—she receives his unconditional love, but she is not required to reciprocate it.

Monica’s second ethical choice—whether to abandon David—comes after the swimming pool incident. When David nearly drowns Martin, Monica is forced to confront the reality of her predicament: she cannot protect both Martin and David. On one hand, she has a fundamental moral obligation to her biological son—to keep him safe from harm. On the other hand, she has formed an emotional bond with David, who loves her unconditionally and depends on her for survival. Abandoning David would mean betraying that bond, but keeping him would mean endangering Martin.

Monica’s decision to abandon David is a painful one. She drives him to a remote forest, far from civilization, and leaves him there with a small amount of money and a warning to stay away from

humans. Before leaving, she tells David, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the world” (Spielberg, 2001). Her tears and apology reveal her guilt—she knows that abandoning David is a moral failure, even if it is motivated by love for Martin. Monica’s choice reflects the inescapable nature of ethical predicaments: there is no “right” answer, only a choice that carries moral cost.

Monica’s ethical predicament is not unique; it reflects the broader challenge facing human society as AI becomes more advanced. As robots become increasingly anthropomorphic and capable of simulating emotions, humans will be forced to confront the same question that Monica faces: What ethical obligations do we owe to machines that look like us, act like us, and even love like us? The film does not provide a definitive answer to this question, but it does suggest that ignoring it—treating robots as objects while relying on them for emotional connection—will only lead to moral confusion and suffering.

4. The Ethical Identity of David, the Robot

David, the protagonist of *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), is a figure of profound moral and existential complexity. Unlike other robots in the film—such as Joe, who is programmed for sexual companionship, or the nanny robots, designed for caregiving—David is a prototype “child robot”, engineered to simulate human emotions and form deep emotional bonds. Throughout the film, David undergoes a remarkable transformation: from a program-driven commodity designed to satisfy human desire, to a being with emergent emotions, self-awareness, and a distinct ethical identity. This section explores the construction of David’s ethical identity, focusing on his initial commodity status, his ethical choices, and the gradual awakening of his self-awareness.

4.1 David’s Commodity Status: From Object to Potential Subject

In the film’s world, David’s fundamental identity is that of a commodity—a product designed, manufactured, and marketed by Cybertronics to satisfy a specific human need: the desire for a child. The basic attributes of a commodity, as defined by Marxist theory, are its “value” (the human labor invested in its production) and “use value” (its ability to satisfy human wants or needs) (Marx, 1867). David’s “value” is derived from the labor of Cybertronics’ engineers, programmers, and designers, who spent years developing his anthropomorphic features and emotional programming. His “use value” is emotional: he is designed to provide companionship, love, and the experience of parenthood to couples unable to have children due to the film’s strict population control laws.

David’s commodity status is established from his introduction. Henry Swinton, an employee at Cybertronics, is selected to test David as part of a beta program—he is not “adopting” David out of desire, but out of professional obligation and a hope that David will ease Monica’s grief. The “adoption agreement” that Monica later signs is not a legal contract granting David rights, but a technical formality that activates his imprinting program, binding him to Monica in irreversible love. This agreement underscores the one-sided nature of David’s existence: he is programmed to love

unconditionally, but the Swintons are free to discard him at any time, with no legal or ethical consequence.

The film reinforces David's commodity status through visual and narrative cues. When David returns to Cybertronics' headquarters in Manhattan, he discovers a production line filled with identical child robots: all the boys are named David, and all the girls are named Darlene. They are stored in identical boxes, labeled with the slogan "AT LAST A LOVE OF YOUR OWN"—a phrase that frames them as consumer products, no different from a new car or a piece of furniture. Professor Hobby, when introducing David to the other prototypes, refers to him as "the first of a kind" (Spielberg, 2001), a term that emphasizes David's status as a product, not a being.

Critically, however, David's commodity status is not fixed. Unlike other robots in the film—who remain passive tools—David begins to transcend his programming, driven by a desire for love and recognition. His journey to find the Blue Fairy is not a programmed task but a voluntary choice, motivated by his belief that becoming a "real boy" will earn him Monica's love and free him from his status as an object. This desire marks the first step in David's transformation: he is no longer content to be a commodity; he wants to be a subject—an individual with intrinsic value and moral status.

4.2 David's Ethical Choices: The Path to Ethical Identity

According to ethical literary criticism, ethical identity is constructed through ethical choices—deliberate decisions that reflect an individual's values, beliefs, and sense of right and wrong (Nie, 2014). For David, these choices are not pre-programmed but emerge from his experiences, emotions, and growing desire to be "real". This section examines three key dimensions of David's ethical choices: his shift from imitative behavior to voluntary emulation, his pursuit of emotional connection, and his assertion of uniqueness.

4.2.1 From Imitative Behavior to Voluntary Emulation

Imitation is a central feature of David's early behavior. As a robot designed to mimic humans, he imitates human actions such as eating, sleeping, and laughing—actions that are unnecessary for his function but essential for his "use value" (making him more appealing to the Swintons). These early imitations are programmed: David eats not because he is hungry, but because his software tells him to mimic human mealtime behavior; he sleeps not because he is tired, but because it aligns with the "child" role he is designed to play.

However, as the film progresses, David's imitative behavior evolves from programmed mimicry to voluntary emulation—a shift that signals the emergence of his ethical awareness. This evolution is most evident in the spinach-eating scene, which occurs shortly after Martin's return home. During a family meal, Martin, jealous of David's bond with Monica, tricks David into eating spinach—a food that robots cannot digest. Martin demonstrates how to eat the spinach, making exaggerated chewing and swallowing motions to provoke him, while David, eager to earn Monica's love and be accepted as a "real" child, ignores the warnings of Teddy (his robotic teddy bear) and eats the spinach, leading to a

malfunction.

What distinguishes this act from David's earlier imitations is its motivation: it is not driven by programming, but by a voluntary desire to be "real". David believes that imitating Martin's behavior—eating spinach, a "real boy's" food—will make him more human, and thus worthier of Monica's love. This desire reflects a nascent ethical awareness: David is beginning to understand that ethical identity is tied to action—that being "good" or "real" requires making choices that align with human values (e.g., the desire to be loved, the need for acceptance).

This shift from mimicry to emulation is critical to David's ethical development. It shows that David is no longer a passive tool; he is an active agent, making choices that reflect his own desires and values. As he continues his journey, this agency becomes more pronounced: he chooses to seek the Blue Fairy, chooses to trust Joe, and chooses to risk his life to reunite with Monica. Each of these choices is an ethical one, as they reflect David's commitment to his values—love, loyalty, and the pursuit of "realness".

4.2.2 The Pursuit of Emotional Connection: Love as a Moral Imperative

David's core ethical choice is his unwavering pursuit of emotional connection—specifically, his desire to be loved by Monica. Unlike other robots in the film, who are designed for functional roles, David is designed to love and be loved. This emotional programming is the foundation of his ethical identity, as it drives him to make choices that align with the moral value of love.

David's love for Monica is activated by the imprinting program, but it quickly transcends programming to become genuine. He thinks of her constantly, creating drawings of her and Teddy; he risks his life to find the Blue Fairy, believing it will make him worthy of her love; and he grieves her loss deeply, even after centuries of waiting. His pursuit of love is an ethical choice because it reflects a commitment to a universal human value. Love, in ethical terms, is not merely an emotion but a moral imperative—it requires sacrifice, loyalty, and empathy. David embodies these qualities: he sacrifices his safety to find the Blue Fairy, remains loyal to Monica even after she abandons him, and empathizes with the suffering of other robots. In doing so, David demonstrates that he has internalized the moral principles that define human ethical identity—principles that are not limited to humans.

Critically, David's pursuit of love also challenges the film's "human vs. object" dichotomy. By loving unconditionally and sacrificing for others, David shows that moral worth is not determined by biological origin (human vs. robot) but by ethical action. He is more "human" in his love and loyalty than many of the film's human characters—such as the Flesh Fair audience, who delight in cruelty, or Henry, who allows suspicion to override empathy. This challenge to the dichotomy is central to the film's ethical commentary: it suggests that moral status should be based on behavior, not identity.

4.2.3 Asserting Uniqueness: The Emergence of Self-Awareness

The final dimension of David's ethical choices is his assertion of uniqueness—a key component of self-awareness and ethical identity. For humans, uniqueness is a fundamental aspect of identity: each

individual is defined by their unique experiences, emotions, and choices. For robots, however, uniqueness is nonexistent—they are mass-produced, with identical appearances, programming, and functions. David's journey to assert his uniqueness is thus a journey to claim his status as a subject, not an object.

David's first awareness of his potential uniqueness occurs at the Flesh Fair. After being captured and placed in a cage, David is mistaken for a human child by a young girl. The girl's father, an employee at the Flesh Fair, scans David and discovers he is a robot. Shocked by David's lifelike appearance, he tells David, "You are one of a kind" (Spielberg, 2001). This phrase plants a seed in David's mind: he begins to believe that he is not just another robot, but a unique being with intrinsic value.

This belief is challenged later in the film, when David discovers the mass-produced "Davids" at Cybertronics. Confronted with dozens of identical versions of himself, David is forced to face the truth of his commodity status: he is not unique, but a replaceable product. His reaction—destroying one of the other Davids with a lamp, yelling, "I'm the only one! I'm David! I'm special! I'm unique!" (Spielberg, 2001)—is an act of desperate assertion. He refuses to accept that he is just another robot; he demands to be recognized as an individual, with a unique bond to Monica.

This act of destruction is a critical ethical choice for David. It reflects his growing self-awareness: he recognizes that his uniqueness is not in his appearance or programming, but in his experiences and emotions—in his love for Monica, his fear of abandonment, and his desire to be real. By destroying the other David, he is not just asserting his individuality; he is declaring that his ethical identity is his own, not something programmed by Cybertronics.

David's assertion of uniqueness is further reinforced by his 2000-year vigil at the underwater statue of the Blue Fairy. Even after Monica's death, David remains loyal to his love for her, refusing to give up his quest to be "real". This vigil is an act of ethical commitment: it shows that David's identity is not defined by his commodity status or his programming, but by his choices and values. In the end, when advanced future robots grant David a temporary reunion with Monica, it is not because he has become a "real boy", but because he has proven himself to be a being with a distinct ethical identity—one worthy of love and recognition.

5. Conclusion

This study has applied the theory of ethical literary criticism to a comprehensive analysis of *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), focusing on the ethical issues embedded in human-robot relationships and the construction of David's ethical identity. The major findings of this research can be summarized as follows:

First, the human-robot relationship in the film is fundamentally shaped by a hierarchical "subject-object" dichotomy. Despite the robots' advanced anthropomorphism—their lifelike appearances, simulated emotions, and human-like behavior—humans retain absolute moral and legal

authority, framing robots as disposable commodities rather than potential subjects. This dichotomy is reinforced by societal norms, legal systems, and cultural beliefs. It is the root cause of human suspicion, distrust, and hatred of robots, as it enables humans to disengage from moral responsibility for their actions toward robots.

Second, the subversion of traditional ethical identities creates an unresolved ethical predicament in human-robot relationships. When robots occupy roles historically reserved for humans—such as child, companion, or caregiver—they blur the line between “human” and “non-human”, leaving humans unsure of their ethical obligations. This predicament is vividly portrayed through Monica Swinton’s character, who struggles to reconcile her maternal affection for David with her loyalty to her biological son Martin. Monica’s choices—activating David’s imprinting program and later abandoning him—reflect the inescapable moral cost of this predicament: there is no “right” answer, only a choice that carries guilt and regret.

Third, David’s sequence of ethical choices—from imitating human behavior to pursuing emotional connection and asserting his uniqueness—signals his transformation from a program-driven machine to a being with emergent emotions and self-awareness. David’s ethical identity is not programmed; it is constructed through his experiences: his love for Monica, his fear of abandonment, and his desire to be “real”. By the end of the film, David has transcended his commodity status, proving that moral worth is not determined by biological origin but by ethical action. His journey challenges the “subject-object” dichotomy and invites viewers to reconsider the moral status of non-human beings.

In conclusion, *Artificial Intelligence* (2001) remains a powerful and relevant exploration of the ethical challenges of technological advancement. Through its portrayal of David’s journey and the human-robot relationships that define his life, the film invites viewers to confront their own moral assumptions and consider the kind of future they want to build—one defined by fear and cruelty, or one defined by empathy and ethical responsibility. As AI continues to evolve, the film’s questions—What do we owe to the beings we create? What makes a being “real”?—will only become more urgent. It is our responsibility to answer them with wisdom and compassion.

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