



Humanising the Artificial: Anthropomorphism, Care, and Relational Self-Reconstruction in Deborah Install's *A Robot in the Garden*

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Abstract: This paper examines anthropomorphism as an ongoing literary process in Deborah Install's *A Robot in the Garden*, in which a human protagonist gradually develops a more responsible relational identity while an artificial being becomes socially intelligible. Based on multiple close readings of the 2015 Random House Canada edition, the study analyses sequences involving naming, pronoun use, bodily injury, comic resistance, separation, repair, and the transfer of caregiving practices. It distinguishes among three aspects that are often conflated in discussions of artificial companions: Ben's attribution of intention and emotion to Tang; the novel's use of first-person focalisation, dialogue, repetition, humour, and vulnerability to direct the reader's attention; and the ethical practices that follow from those attributions. The argument does not require proof of Tang's consciousness. Rather, Tang's material fragility and distinctive behaviour make him non-replaceable within Ben's emotional world, allowing curiosity to develop into care and care into sustained action. At the same time, the attachment has an unmistakable therapeutic dimension. Tang functions as a surface for projection, a substitute child, and, particularly at the beginning, a more manageable alternative to reciprocal human contact. The novel's principal transformation becomes visible when Ben applies the capacities acquired through robot-directed care to Amy and their unborn child. The article therefore argues that the ethical potential of anthropomorphism remains deliberately ambiguous. Ben's relationship with Tang gives him a stronger sense of accountability and relational agency, yet this development remains entangled with self-repair, consumer obsolescence, dependency, and paternalism. The study contributes to literary discussions of artificial intelligence and companionship by foregrounding narrative form and relational practice rather than making an unequivocal claim about machine personhood.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Robot Fiction, Narrative Ethics, Posthumanism, Human–Robot Relationship, AI Companionship.

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence has become central to discussions of work, education, communication, friendship, and care. Its growing social presence has also transformed its literary representation. Artificial beings are no longer portrayed only as utilitarian tools, technological threats, or sophisticated humanoid rivals; increasingly, they appear as friends, conversational partners, dependants, and emotionally significant figures. This shift concerns not only technological competence but also how people understand, trust, depend on, and respond to artificial agents. Questions of projection, perceived mindedness, vulnerability, attachment, and responsibility now shape both empirical research on human-machine interaction and cultural representations of artificial intelligence (Broadbent, 2017; Cave *et al.*, 2020; Damiano & Dumouchel, 2018). Fiction is especially well suited to examining these issues because it can show how such relationships develop and acquire emotional and ethical significance over time. A name, a pronoun, a repeated gesture, a comic habit, an exposed vulnerability, or a recurring act of care can give meaning to a non-human figure. Literary storytelling can also preserve ambiguity: mechanical behaviour may begin



to suggest feeling without proving the existence of a human-like inner life, and a machine may gradually come to resemble a character. Narrative empathy does not require such proof. It emerges through formal choices that direct attention, encourage interpretation, and shape feeling (Keen, 2007). Literary anthropomorphism should therefore be understood neither as a simple category error nor as evidence that a machine has become human. It is more accurately treated as a mode of representation that influences moral judgement, reader affiliation, and character development. This human-AI interaction framework further explains how perceived machine agency and interface cues shape users' social and psychological responses to artificial agents (Sundar, 2020).

Deborah Install's *A Robot in the Garden* offers a particularly useful example because Tang is neither physically threatening nor technologically advanced. He appears in Ben Chambers's garden as a dented, dirty, and apparently obsolete robot whose body seems to have been assembled from ordinary household components. Ben's own life is similarly unsettled: he lives in an inherited house, lacks a clear professional direction, and confronts the collapse of his marriage. The novel brings these two forms of incompleteness into relation. Tang's visible damage mirrors Ben's difficulty in translating feeling into sustained action, while their journey to repair Tang becomes the setting in which vulnerability, humour, dependence, attention, and responsibility are repeatedly tested.

This article does not attempt to determine whether Tang should be classified as a person. The first-person narration provides no direct access to his consciousness, and many of his apparent emotions are filtered through Ben's interpretation. Instead, the article asks how the novel makes Tang socially and ethically legible and what happens to Ben when he acts on that legibility. This distinction separates three analytical levels: character anthropomorphism, through which Ben attributes intention and feeling to Tang; narrative anthropomorphism, through which focalisation, dialogue, repetition, and vulnerability guide readers towards similar inferences; and relational consequence, through which those inferences generate practices of care.

Previous studies have examined anthropomorphism as a psychological response to social cues, a design effect, and a problem in robot ethics (Blut et al., 2021; Kühne & Peter, 2022; Złotowski et al., 2015a). Relational approaches further argue that ethical responses can emerge through interaction and shared social meaning even before the status of an artificial agent has been fully resolved (Coeckelbergh, 2020; de Graaf, 2016). Posthumanist and literary scholarship approaches the issue from a different direction. Hayles (1999), Nayar (2014), and Wolfe (2010), for example, emphasise embodiment, narrative perspective, and the unstable boundary between the human and the non-human. The present study brings these perspectives into conversation while maintaining their disciplinary distinctions. Human-robot interaction research provides a valuable conceptual framework, but it is not treated as evidence about fictional readers or the consciousness of fictional machines. More recent scholarship strengthens this framework by treating anthropomorphism as a relational and hermeneutic problem rather than merely a perceptual error (Coeckelbergh, 2022), while longitudinal evidence shows that anthropomorphic responses can change as familiarity with a social robot develops (Kühne et al., 2024).

In Install's novel, anthropomorphism operates as a recurring narrative technique. Tang is initially distinguished through formal devices and material features; Ben then interprets these signs as expressions of vulnerability, emotion, and preference, and his response gradually changes his behaviour. As their bond develops, his interpretations become increasingly personal and intimate. Yet this development produces conflicting ethical consequences. It remains entangled with projection, paternalism, emotional substitution, and the reconstruction of Ben's masculine self-image, even as it fosters courage, perseverance, and attentiveness. Ben's development becomes fully meaningful only when his concern for Tang begins to shape his responses to Amy and the unborn child. The novel's central transformation is therefore not Tang's movement towards humanity, but Ben's movement from avoidance towards a form of responsibility capable of extending beyond the robot.

2. Critical Framework

2.1 Anthropomorphism, Focalisation, and Narrative Empathy

Anthropomorphism generally refers to the attribution of human qualities, intentions, emotions, or agency to non-human entities. In human-robot interaction, such responses may be influenced by language, responsiveness, autonomy, appearance, and the observer's social needs (Blut et al., 2021; Broadbent, 2017). A machine may remain visibly mechanical and still be perceived as frightened, stubborn, affectionate, or in need of protection. These studies



provide an important foundation, but literary anthropomorphism also depends on narrative form. A proper name distinguishes an individual from a general category; dialogue gives a non-human figure a place within an exchange; repeated behaviour creates expectation; and focalisation gives emotional meaning to otherwise uncertain gestures.

Ben narrates *A Robot in the Garden* retrospectively in the first person. Readers therefore encounter Tang through a voice that is humorous, self-revealing, occasionally unreliable, and increasingly attached to the robot. Ben does not merely describe Tang's movements; he interprets them emotionally. A pulsing light becomes a "robot heart," lowered eyes suggest sadness, a mechanical hiss is heard as a sigh, and rapid movement appears as excitement. These descriptions reveal how Ben reads Tang while also inviting readers to follow the same interpretive path. Keen (2007) argues that narrative empathy is shaped by textual organisation and does not automatically lead to moral action. Install's novel can therefore draw readers towards Tang's vulnerability without resolving what Tang actually feels. Several distinctions are useful here. Social legibility refers to the extent to which Tang is recognised as a unique participant rather than as standard equipment. Character anthropomorphism describes Ben's attribution of feelings and goals to him. Reader alignment refers to the narrative's invitation to view Tang through Ben's perspective, although individual readers may respond differently. Ethical significance concerns the practical and moral consequences of treating Tang as a being whose actions and welfare matter. These concepts are related, but they should not be treated as interchangeable.

2.2 Posthuman Embodiment and Artificial Particularity

Posthumanist criticism challenges the idea that human subjectivity exists independently of bodies, technologies, and relationships. Hayles (1999) contests the assumption that information can be separated from its material embodiment, while Wolfe (2010) examines how the category of the human is often defined through the exclusion of non-human life and agency. Tang's body is therefore crucial to the novel. He is heavy, noisy, scratched, prone to leaking, and difficult to carry. He is neither a disembodied intelligence nor a sophisticated android; his physical limitations shape the journey, and caring for him becomes a necessary but frequently demanding responsibility. The novel also challenges the assumption that moral worth depends on aesthetic attractiveness. Tang is old-fashioned, bulky, and functionally limited, whereas Amy prefers a sleek, efficient, and highly humanoid robot. Yet these very limitations make him distinctive. In a culture organised around upgrades and replacement, Tang acquires value not because he outperforms newer models but because of the shared history formed around him. He is therefore both a technological object embedded in consumer culture and a posthuman companion. Ben's refusal to replace him challenges the logic of disposability, although it does not eliminate either the unequal structure of ownership or the fact that Tang initially becomes valuable within Ben's emotional life. Haraway's account of companion relations is useful here because it understands identity as something produced through interaction rather than possessed in isolation (Haraway, 2008). Ben and Tang are not equal subjects, yet each becomes more distinct through the other's needs. Tang's dependence gives Ben a role and a reason to act, while Ben's response sustains Tang's social presence. Their interaction shapes both figures, even though the relationship remains unequal.

2.3 Care Ethics, Paternalism, and Relational Responsibility

Care ethics understands morality through sustained attention to particular vulnerabilities as well as through adherence to general principles. Noddings (2013) emphasises relational continuity, engrossment, and responsiveness. This distinction is crucial in the novel because attachment alone does not constitute care. Ben's feelings acquire moral weight only when they are followed by consistent action. He cleans Tang, arranges travel, searches for a repairer, remains with him during danger, and tolerates the repeated inconveniences of looking after him. Yet such care is not necessarily innocent. It may become paternalistic, possessive, or motivated by the caregiver's need for affirmation and reassurance. Tang is also repeatedly represented as childlike: he plays, sleeps, learns language, becomes frightened, refuses guidance, and requires supervision. This framing makes his needs intelligible within a familiar parental model, but it may also diminish his autonomy. Ben often decides what Tang needs, explains him to others, and interprets resistance as misbehaviour. The analysis must therefore ask whether Ben attends to Tang's preferences or merely uses care to confirm his own importance. Relational robot ethics is valuable in this context because it focuses on conduct that emerges through interaction rather than on fixed intrinsic properties (Coeckelbergh, 2020; de Graaf, 2016). The novel gives this problem a specifically literary form: readers never gain direct access to Tang's inner life, so recognition and projection remain inseparably connected.



2.4 Technological Companionship, Substitution, and Self-Repair

Artificial companions may provide a sense of social support and continuity. They may also seem more attractive than reciprocal human relationships because they appear easier to manage (Ta et al., 2020; Turkle, 2017). Install presents both possibilities. Tang interrupts Ben's passivity and gives him a reason to act, but the robot initially also allows Ben to avoid the more difficult responsibilities of listening to Amy, confronting professional failure, and deciding whether he wants a child. Their relationship can therefore be read through several overlapping models: Tang as companion, substitute child, transitional object, comic double, embodiment of obsolescence, and catalyst for masculine rehabilitation. No single model fully explains the relationship. The novel's critical force lies precisely in making the same attachment capable of both care and avoidance, responsibility and self-repair.

3. Methodology

This study applies qualitative close reading to Deborah Install's *A Robot in the Garden*, specifically the 2015 Random House Canada edition (ISBN 978-0-345-81533-0). The full novel was read several times. A first reading mapped the developmental arc of Ben and Tang; a second identified scenes involving naming, forms of reference, bodily damage, fear, refusal, humour, care, separation, repair, and the transfer of responsibility to human relationships; a third reading tested the proposed recursive model against contradictory or disconfirming episodes. The selected passages were grouped under six analytical categories: (1) individualisation through naming and address; (2) focalised attribution of emotion or intention; (3) material, social, and narrative vulnerability; (4) behavioural particularity and resistance; (5) caregiving practice and failure; and (6) transfer of relational capacities beyond the robot relationship. The indicators were derived from the article's conceptual framework and refined during iterative reading. They function as interpretive categories rather than quantitative codes. This three-stage reading process was designed to preserve the sequence of the narrative while also allowing recurrent motifs to be compared across distant chapters. Attention was given not only to scenes that support the proposed model but also to moments that complicate or resist it, so that interpretation would not depend on a selectively assembled set of examples.

The analysis distinguishes textual evidence from interpretive inference. Observable narrative evidence includes quoted dialogue, pronoun use, reported action, scene sequencing, and first-person description. Claims about loneliness, projection, or dependency are treated as interpretive inferences and anchored in specific passages, including Amy's counter-reading of Ben's behaviour. Particular emphasis is given to episodes that test the central claim: Ben's use of Tang after Amy's departure, his decision to leave Tang alone at the hotel, Tang's resistance to Ben's authority, and the possibility that the conclusion restores Ben to a conventional domestic role. Page references follow the pagination of the Random House Canada digital edition. The article makes no empirical claims about actual human-robot interaction or real readers. Its concern is how the novel shapes anthropomorphic interpretation and connects that interpretation to Ben's development. This distinction is maintained throughout the analysis so that descriptions of narrative form are not confused with claims about psychological fact. The method therefore treats ambiguity as a feature of the text to be interpreted rather than as a problem that must be eliminated.

4. Analysis

4.1 Before Tang: Inherited Space and Deferred Responsibility

The first chapter establishes Ben's later development through images of inheritance, neglect, and delay. When Amy tells him that the garden gate needs repair, he admits, "I ignored this" (Install, 2015, p. 7). Although brief, the line neatly summarises his attitude towards domestic responsibility. The broken gate is not a trivial detail: it becomes Tang's point of entry and materialises Ben's neglect of the house. The plot therefore begins with Ben's inaction. His uncertain identity is also reflected in the study where he spends his time. "Not my study ... my father's," he corrects himself before turning "aimlessly" in his father's old chair, surrounded by his father's books (Install, 2015, p. 8). The repeated possessive suggests that Ben remains confined within an inherited past and has not yet established a direction of his own.

Ben remains emotionally and physically "out of the way" while Amy works, cooks, and manages the household (Install, 2015, p. 8). He is capable of feeling, but he rarely converts feeling into responsible action. Amy's



perspective therefore challenges Ben's self-understanding. She links his fascination with Tang to his unemployment, domestic passivity, and reluctance to discuss children. Her complaint raises an early suspicion that he may be using Tang as another diversion. The robot gives Ben someone tangible to care for, but it may also offer a safer and more manageable commitment than marriage. From the outset, then, Ben's attachment is both ethically troubling and potentially transformative.

4.2 From Damaged Object to Addressed Presence

Tang is first presented as a comic but visibly damaged figure. Ben describes him as resembling a "school project," with exposed chest panels, dented metal, vent-like limbs, and grabbers (*Install*, 2015, pp. 8–10). At this stage, Tang appears less like a recognisable social presence than a piece of abandoned machinery. The tone begins to shift, however, when Tang is startled by Ben's greeting. "I felt I had to help him," Ben says (*Install*, 2015, p. 9), as Tang falls and kicks weakly. The sense of compulsion is significant because Ben acts before he has any reliable evidence of intelligence or consciousness. Tang first becomes ethically noticeable through fragility rather than ability. Ben's first-person narration then gives mechanical detail an organic resonance. Tang's illuminated chest becomes a "robot heart" (*Install*, 2015, p. 10). Although Ben preserves uncertainty by introducing the description with "which I assumed," the metaphor conveys rhythm, damage, and vitality. He does not objectively demonstrate Tang's emotion; instead, he uses an affective vocabulary to interpret exposed machinery, making the robot's damage personal and meaningful.

Naming further consolidates Tang's movement from damaged object to addressed presence. Ben crouches beside him and asks, "What's your name?" "Tang," the robot replies (*Install*, 2015, p. 10). Ben establishes a simple form of reciprocity by offering his own name and asking for Tang's. Tang is not merely named by another person; however minimally, he participates in his own identification. Ben's manner of communicating with him changes, even though Tang's speech remains limited and repetitive. Ben adopts a "different line of inquiry," lowers his voice, and reformulates his questions (*Install*, 2015, pp. 10–11). Anthropomorphism here is not a philosophical declaration of Tang's personhood but a practical shift in language, attention, and conduct.

The ethical difference between Ben and Amy is subsequently expressed through their choice of pronouns. Amy frequently calls Tang "it" and judges him according to appearance, usefulness, and replaceability. Ben corrects her: "Tang's a 'him' ... not an 'it'" (*Install*, 2015, p. 12). This correction does not establish gender or personhood, but it shows that Ben no longer regards Tang as merely a piece of equipment. Amy's "it" tends to appear in discussions of disposal and replacement, whereas Ben's "him" accompanies curiosity, protection, and repair. The competing pronouns therefore signal two distinct systems of value.

The disagreement intensifies when Amy suggests taking Tang to the tip. Horrified, Ben insists that Tang remain while he searches for information about the robot's origins (*Install*, 2015, pp. 14–15). By this point, Tang has acquired sufficient particularity for disposal to resemble abandonment. Yet the scene also reveals a problem in Ben's conduct: he overrules Amy by asserting ownership of the house. His defence of Tang demonstrates moral concern, but it simultaneously damages his human relationship. This tension between care for the robot and failure towards others lies at the centre of the novel.

4.3 Care as Repeated Practice, Failure, and Correction

Ben's first sustained act of care is physical and responsive. When Tang reacts uneasily to a wet sponge, Ben sets it aside and works carefully around the rivets with a small cloth (*Install*, 2015, pp. 16–17). He notices Tang's response and adjusts his method, demonstrating a developing attentiveness. The task also serves Ben's own needs. He is pleased that the cleaning may take several days. Whereas he previously allowed time to pass without purpose, caring for Tang gives his days structure, direction, and meaning.

Care and projection converge in the same episode. When Ben finds a broken plate marked "Property of B—," he interprets Tang's dejected posture as evidence that the robot misses an unnamed former owner. He then feels pity for "the little broken box" (*Install*, 2015, p. 18). The narration, however, offers no independent proof that Tang is grieving. Ben's compassion may be sincere, but the emotion he attributes to Tang is partly produced by his own

interpretation. This pattern recurs throughout the novel: an ambiguous gesture is translated into feeling, and that interpretation prompts Ben to act.

The leaking cylinder makes this process urgent. When Tang warns that he will “stop” if the fluid runs out, Ben recognises that his own delay has already wasted valuable time (Install, 2015, pp. 28–29). Procrastination is no longer merely a private weakness; it can now harm another being. To accommodate Tang's needs, Ben repeatedly changes his plans, travels despite his fear, and pays for a cabin seat. Care therefore acquires practical cost as well as emotional significance.

The motel episode exposes the limits of Ben's care. He leaves Tang alone while he goes for a drink, and a stranger asks whether a robot supposedly under his protection is safe without him (Install, 2015, pp. 69–70). The question forces Ben to distinguish affection from responsibility. When he returns, he discovers that Tang has repeatedly called his name in panic. Ben embraces him, apologises, and kisses his metal head (Install, 2015, pp. 71–72). The police officer and the motel owner also hold Ben accountable. Their response makes one point unmistakable: when a caregiver is absent at the moment of need, care cannot be judged by feeling alone.

Tang's response prevents the scene from becoming entirely paternalistic. He rejects the motel owner's offer to keep him, reaches for Ben, and cries out his name (Install, 2015, p. 72). Tang expresses a preference, although he remains dependent. His choice strengthens the bond between them and deepens Ben's responsibility. The episode completes a narrative cycle: Tang's vulnerability invites interpretation; interpretation prompts care; failed care produces shame; shame leads Ben to correct his behaviour; and correction intensifies their attachment.

4.4 Comic Resistance, Autonomy, and the Limits of Paternal Care

Tang is often described in childlike terms, but that framing does not exhaust his character. He sleeps, plays with objects, learns to speak, repeatedly watches the same films, becomes jealous, fears costumes, and refuses instruction. Lizzie openly calls him childish, while Ben frequently adopts a parental tone. This framing makes Tang's needs readily intelligible and positions Ben as both protector and disciplinarian. Yet Tang's comic resistance disrupts that hierarchy. He chooses a muscle car, takes control of the radio, invents excuses after breaking a museum display, ignores instructions, demands constant entertainment, insists on a premium seat, and refuses to tolerate androids. His repeated “No” prevents him from appearing as obedient machinery, even though it does not amount to complete autonomy. Ben eventually describes Tang as both “obstinate” and “caring” and observes that he “doesn't just carry out orders” (Install, 2015, pp. 86–87). The same qualities that make Tang inefficient also establish his individuality.

The “Born to Be Wild” episode combines humour with vulnerability. Ben laughs as Tang dances awkwardly in the car, but quickly reflects that Tang was manufactured to serve rather than born and that the leaking cylinder may soon end his existence (Install, 2015, pp. 54–55). Humour does not diminish the seriousness of Tang's condition; instead, it heightens the urgency of his vulnerability. Readers are invited to enjoy his eccentric behaviour while confronting the contrast between his apparent personality and his designed function. Humour also prevents Ben's concern from appearing morally pure. He is frequently impatient, embarrassed, indulgent, and susceptible to Tang's protests. At the airport, Tang clings to him and creates a disturbance until Ben secures a cabin seat (Install, 2015, pp. 30–31). Ben acknowledges Tang's preference, but he also yields under pressure. Good care therefore requires judgement: it cannot be reduced either to command or to indulgence. The replacement scenes place this problem within consumer culture. Cory offers Ben a modern robot, assuming that Tang can simply be discarded. “I'll stick with this one,” Ben replies (Install, 2015, p. 51). The personal bond outweighs technical function, yet the phrase “this one” still belongs to the language of selection and possession. The novel challenges disposability without fully escaping the market logic that treats Tang as interchangeable.

4.5 Projection, Substitute Intimacy, and Amy's Counter-Reading

The early chapters most clearly challenge a simple therapeutic reading of the relationship. Amy tells Bryony that she initially hoped Tang would prompt Ben to accept responsibility, but later concludes that the robot has become another distraction. She contrasts Ben's attention to Tang with his habit of abandoning projects and his failure to recognise her desire for a child (Install, 2015, pp. 21–22). Because Ben himself reports this criticism, it functions as evidence within the narrative rather than as an external judgement. Amy articulates what Ben is not yet



able to admit. After she leaves, Ben more openly treats Tang as a substitute. Having rejected Amy, Bryony, and the rest of his family, he tells Tang, "I've got you, haven't I?" before deciding, while intoxicated, to travel to California (Install, 2015, pp. 24–25). The journey therefore begins with mixed motives. Ben cares for Tang, but he also struggles with a damaged masculine identity, resents failure, and wants to prove himself. Tang is both an ethical other and an instrument in Ben's project of self-reconstruction.

Tang resembles a transitional object, although the comparison has limits. He allows Ben to transfer vulnerability onto a being he can protect and provides continuity after the breakdown of the marriage. Tang's leaking body mirrors Ben's own sense of damaged usefulness, and the process of repair gives material form to Ben's desire to reconstruct himself. Yet Tang is more than a projection: he resists Ben, surprises him, and imposes responsibilities that Ben cannot fully control. Amy, moreover, should not be reduced to an obstacle in Ben and Tang's relationship. Her labour, dissatisfaction, desire for a child, and demand for reciprocity reveal the unequal distribution of care at the beginning of the novel. She has already been performing much of the less visible emotional and domestic work, which complicates the moral authority of Ben's defence of Tang. At times, the narrative devotes more dramatic attention to repairing the robot than to Amy's daily effort to sustain the household and marriage. This imbalance is only partly corrected when Ben later assumes some of the routine and repetitive care work required at home.

4.6 From Robot-Directed Care to Human Relational Agency

Ben's development moves beyond personal self-repair when the practices he acquires through caring for Tang begin to shape his relationships with other people. He does not simply return home with a repaired robot; he returns with a greater capacity for attentiveness, perseverance, and practical responsibility. He has learned to prepare, persist, travel under pressure, apologise when things go wrong, and attend to another's needs. Bryony observes that Ben did not give up after Amy left and that the journey required courage (Install, 2015) later chapter "Homecoming"). Her judgement matters because it sets another character's assessment against Ben's own account of himself. The clearest evidence of change appears in the pregnancy chapters. Amy concedes that there is "more to him than a metal box" and says that Ben has been "like a father" to Tang (Install, 2015, p. 191). Her language revises both of her earlier positions: Ben's concern is no longer dismissed as mere avoidance, and Tang is no longer simply "it." This acknowledgement does not invalidate her earlier criticism. Rather, it shows that Ben's care has begun to extend beyond Tang. When Tang detects the unborn child's heartbeat, a moment of shared reassurance emerges. Amy asks whether he can hear it, and Tang confirms that the child is alive (Install, 2015, pp. 193–194). Tang no longer substitutes for human care but helps to facilitate it. For a brief moment, Ben, Amy, Tang, and the unborn child form a small relational unit in which technological perception, emotional reassurance, and practical presence converge. The transfer is gradual rather than immediate, and the novel repeatedly tests whether habits developed in relation to Tang can survive the more demanding reciprocity of human relationships. This distinction is important because care for a dependent robot can remain easier to control than care within a marriage, where another person may disagree, withdraw, or demand recognition on equal terms.

Amy later remarks that Ben would be a "better father" (Install, 2015, p. 195). The comparative form is significant because it does not present him as completely transformed or naturally paternal. It acknowledges instead that he has changed from the man introduced at the beginning of the novel. He responds to the pregnancy through ordinary acts of care: making tea, preparing the nursery, helping Amy with breathing exercises, remaining beside her during labour, and agreeing to accompany her to the hospital. These acts are less dramatic than the repair journey, but they show that his new sense of responsibility has entered everyday life. Ben's final words, "But I do now," express his desire to become a father (Install, 2015, p. 214). The declaration does more than restore a conventional model of domestic masculinity. The marriage remains uncertain, and the narrative still leaves open the possibility of future failure.

Ben's reconstructed identity is therefore both relational and provisional. He has acquired the capacity to choose responsibility, but he must continue to enact that choice in practice. The novel does not present responsibility as a permanent achievement; it remains a repeated discipline sustained through ordinary conduct.

Figure 1 illustrates the stages of Ben's identity reconstruction. The process begins with anthropomorphic perception, through which Tang becomes an object of focused attention. That perception develops into emotional attachment and then into an enduring obligation of care. These encounters subsequently reshape Ben's sense of



purpose and responsibility. The sequence suggests that anthropomorphism acquires ethical force when perceived human qualities lead not merely to sentiment but to repeated relational action.

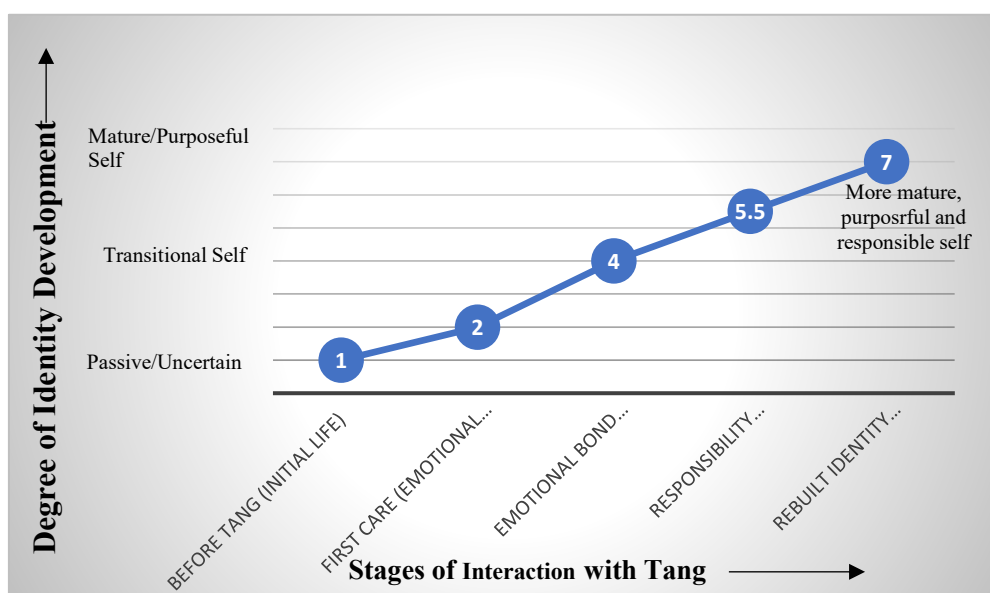


Figure 1. Conceptual Representation of Identity Reconstruction through Anthropomorphism in A Robot in the Garden.

5. Discussion: A Recursive Literary Mechanism

The evidence supports a recursive rather than a linear account of anthropomorphism. In the first cycle, Tang's fall, exposed machinery, and limited speech are interpreted through Ben's focalisation as signs of fragility and emerging personality. Ben then names, cleans, protects, and transports him, and these actions strengthen his emotional commitment. Tang's later behaviour consequently carries the weight of their shared history. His preference for Ben at the motel matters because earlier acts of care have already made the relationship difficult to abandon. The motel episode initiates a second cycle. Ben's decision to leave Tang alone exposes the limits of his belief that affection is equivalent to care. Tang's distress, together with the criticism of others, compels Ben to reconsider his conduct. After this failure, his care becomes more reliable and less casual. The model therefore includes a temporal dimension that a static account of empathy or attachment cannot adequately explain. The meaning of the relationship changes through the accumulation of attribution, action, failure, consequence, and reinterpretation. Recursion also explains why later scenes cannot be understood in isolation. Each new encounter revises the meaning of earlier actions, and earlier failures remain active within subsequent acts of care. The model thus treats character development as cumulative, self-correcting, and vulnerable to reversal rather than as a simple progression from indifference to virtue.

Four literary elements shape this process. First-person focalisation makes Ben's interpretations visible while limiting direct access to Tang. Characterisation creates continuity through repeated behaviours, gestures, and acts of resistance rather than through proof of consciousness. Tang's humour attracts readers while preventing the narrative from becoming excessively sentimental. Plot then gives these perceptions practical consequences. Travel deadlines, separation, the leaking cylinder, and Amy's pregnancy all test whether Tang's value can survive pressure, inconvenience, and competing obligations. The model also clarifies the relationship between Ben and the reader. Readers need not accept that Tang possesses human consciousness. Instead, they are invited to judge Ben's conduct by observing the consequences of his belief. Abandonment, humiliation, and replacement thereby become morally troubling even while Tang's inner status remains unresolved. Each element performs a distinct function, yet their effects overlap. Focalisation supplies interpretation, characterisation supplies continuity, humour regulates emotional intensity, and plot converts perception into consequence. Together they make anthropomorphism narratively persuasive without requiring the novel to settle the metaphysical question of consciousness.

The recursive process also has important limitations. Care intensifies attachment, but attachment may in turn reinforce projection. Tang's dependence allows Ben to feel useful, and defending Tang contributes to the

reconstruction of his masculine identity. At the same time, representing Tang as a child can subordinate his autonomy to Ben's parental authority. The novel does not resolve these tensions. It asks whether forms of care developed within an unequal artificial relationship can become less self-centred when extended to Amy and the child. Other interpretations also remain available. Tang may be read as a substitute child, a material image of Ben's damaged self, a comic figure who eases anxiety about technology, an obsolete object rescued from replacement, or a catalyst for restoring domestic life. The recursive model accommodates these alternatives because a single relationship may perform several functions at once. Tang can remain both a singular presence and a technological object, both companion and instrument, both other and mirror. This multiplicity is not a weakness in the interpretation; it reflects the novel's refusal to stabilise Tang within a single symbolic role. The ethical ambiguity of the relationship depends precisely on his ability to function simultaneously as a material object, a social presence, and a vehicle for Ben's self-understanding.

This article does not propose a comprehensive theory of robot ethics. It offers a method for interpreting fictional artificial companions. The first step is to identify the formal cues that lead a character to attribute emotion or intention. The analysis then considers how those attributions are translated into action, where that action fails, and how other characters challenge it. The final question is whether capacities developed through the artificial companion remain confined to that relationship or extend into human relationships. Applied comparatively, this method can help distinguish narratives in which anthropomorphism primarily encourages substitution from those in which it cultivates accountability (Table 1).

Table 1. Textual stages and functions in the recursive mechanism

Narrative stage	Representative evidence	Formal function	Effect on Ben
Deferred responsibility	Broken gate; inherited study; "I ignored this" (p. 7)	Establishes static focaliser and domestic counterpoint	Makes Tang's concrete need unusually legible
Individualisation	Naming exchange; "him" rather than "it" (pp. 10-12)	Dialogue and reference separate Tang from generic machinery	Creates addressability and moral hesitation
Material vulnerability	Fall, exposed "robot heart," leaking cylinder (pp. 9-10, 28-29)	Embodied fragility converts mechanism into risk	Turns delay into potential harm
Care and failure	Cleaning, travel, motel abandonment and apology (pp. 16-18, 69-72)	Plot tests whether feeling becomes reliable practice	Produces shame, correction, and continuity
Resistance and particularity	Refusals, humour, preferences, rejection of upgrade (pp. 30-55)	Repeated motifs create characterological expectation	Makes Tang non-substitutable but complicates paternal control
Projection and substitution	"I've got you, haven't I?"; Amy's critique (pp. 21-25)	Counter-reading exposes mixed motive	Links caregiving to self-repair and avoidance
Transferred care	Amy's revised judgement; heartbeat; fatherhood (pp. 191-195, 214)	Extends relational capacity beyond robot-directed attachment	Marks provisional movement toward accountable human relation

6. Conclusion

In *A Robot in the Garden*, anthropomorphism is presented not as proof of machine personhood but as a narrative technique. Tang becomes significant because the novel gradually renders him distinct. His name, Ben's



choice of pronouns, the first-person narration, his comic habits, bodily damage, and repeated acts of resistance establish him as an addressed presence. These features do not resolve the question of his inner life; rather, they make Ben's interpretations visible and allow his conduct to be judged. Ben changes not through a single revelation but through repeated practice. He cleans Tang, protects him, carries him across national borders, fails in his responsibilities, apologises, and continues to provide care. His initial concentration on Tang gradually alters his conduct towards Amy and the unborn child. His development is therefore best understood as the formation of a more responsible relational identity. To describe this change simply as becoming "more human" would be misleading, because such language implies that failure, grief, passivity, or uncertainty somehow diminishes a person's humanity. The emphasis on repetition also prevents the conclusion from treating moral development as a completed possession. Responsibility must be renewed in changing circumstances, and the value of Ben's transformation depends on whether he continues to practise the attentiveness that Tang first demanded.

Nevertheless, the relationship remains ethically unresolved. Ben projects his own needs onto Tang, who functions both as a substitute child and as a distinct other. Tang is also a dependable companion. Although recognised as singular and irreplaceable, he remains a technological object under human ownership. Ben's care responds to Tang's vulnerability while also satisfying his own desire to feel useful and important. The novel does not classify these motives as either pure or corrupt. Instead, it suggests that mixed attachments may generate ethically meaningful responsibility when the capacities they develop extend beyond the original relationship. Because the study is confined to a single fictional work, it does not claim that actual robotic companions necessarily promote moral development. Its focus is literary form, particularly the way anthropomorphic perception produces actions that assign moral weight to an uncertain mechanical interior. Future comparative research could examine a wider range of robot and AI narratives to determine how gender, class, ethnicity, disability, embodiment, and consumer culture shape such relationships. It could also compare narratives in which artificial companionship displaces human reciprocity with those in which it strengthens relational responsibility. Such comparison would also clarify whether the recursive pattern identified here is distinctive to Install's novel or belongs to a broader tradition of artificial-companion fiction. It could further examine how narrative voice, genre, and the degree of technological realism shape readers' willingness to interpret mechanical behaviour as ethically significant.

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A. Divyadharshini: Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. A. Manikandan: Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing – Review & Editing. S. Surya: Formal Analysis, Investigation. V. Saravanan: Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing. J. Charly Jerome: Writing – Review & Editing, Formal Analysis. All the authors read and approved the final version of this manuscript.

Does this article screen for similarity?

Yes

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. There is also no financial interest to report. The author certifies that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

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