

“Unharmonious Concerto”: Music and Alienation in *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall*

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009, *Nocturnes* for short) is considered a concentrated expression of interweaving music and literature. Music contributes to setting its background, portraying its characters, and developing its plot. The article systematically examines the function of music in *Nocturnes*, exploring its relationship with narration and thematic construction. It argues that music is vital to constructing the theme of *Nocturnes*: alienation, which shows Ishiguro's concern for people's living predicaments in modern life.

Keywords: *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall*, music, alienation, thematic construction

1. Introduction

Music in literature is sometimes vital, implying connotative meanings that communicational expressions may not reveal. Music could show the characters' psychological state and social status, reflect a specific community's lifestyle, and convey spiritual requirements in a certain period. For example, the organic integration of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) and jazz music “gives the novel a profound cultural connotation, and makes it a metaphor for the living conditions of African Americans” (Wang, 2009, p. 51). Moreover, music could be seen as a metaphor related to identity, class, and society frequently. “The interaction of metaphors can create an affective climate” (Bowie, 2018, p. 223), which is inferred from the content and relies on the phonic and rhythmic features of the words as well as the structure of the work. The dynamic design of music has a heterogeneous relationship with the affective system of human beings (Wang, 2021, p. 60). Additionally, some musical techniques are absorbed into literature and used in literary interpretation, for instance, regarding a novel as a symphony that engages a text with a melodic style, showing an integration of music and literature.

One good example of demonstrating the importance of music in literary work is Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009, *Nocturnes* for short), a collection of short stories built around several musicians and music lovers. Music is the recurring image inserted in discourse and plot, which is listened to, talked about, described, performed, and created by the characters (Mei, 2016). Music is vital to *Nocturnes*, contributing to its characterization, plot, and structure. The novel imitates the musical form of a quintet, reflecting Ishiguro's systematic repetition and sporadic deviation (Cheng, 2010). And the five stories in the novel, also present an imitation of “variation form” (a musical style to further express a composition's theme by applying some theme variations), which repeatedly conveys the theme of *Nocturnes* (Wang, 2021, p. 67). Therefore, music helps *Nocturnes* a lot to convey “intrinsic relational meaning”, which closely relates to the thematic construction of *Nocturnes* (Hejmej, 2018, p. 53). Music makes *Nocturnes* “jump out the medium of language”, “pursue the aesthetic effect and narrative energy of the music medium”, and form “a grand narrative with a common theme” (Mei, 2016, p. 78; Wang, 2021, p. 61).

Therefore, this article focuses on the recurring image of music in *Nocturnes* to argue that music makes the novel an “unharmonious concerto” of modern people's living predicaments, conveying the common theme among the stories: alienation. Referring to a state or a feeling of being alienated from society, other people, and even one's true self, alienation is divided by Melvin Seeman into six components: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, social isolation, and cultural estrangement (Seeman, 1975). This article explores the thematic construction of alienation in *Nocturnes* from three aspects: social isolation, self-estrangement, and disillusionment of self-value. By textual analysis, this article aims to systematically

analyze the function of music in *Nocturnes*, exploring how musicality constructs the theme of alienation.

2. Music and Modern Life

Throughout the novel, there is no precise statement of the time when the stories take place. Time is pointed out by the description of music, such as various musical mediums, instruments, musicians, and songs. Through rich depictions of characters and circumstances related to music, *Nocturnes* presents a society where musicians live agitated and unsettled lives, reflecting people's predicaments in modern life.

Because of the fast-growing technology and the popularity of digital music, the recording industry declined and recorded music fell behind since the 21st century. The first two stories of *Nocturnes*, "Crooner" and "Come Rain or Come Shine," are set in this time: records were discarded and went "cheap in junk shops"; CDs and fancy stereo systems replace records and record players (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 23). Besides replacing music mediums, different musical instruments and music genres also witnessed the change in modern society. In "Crooner," the narrator Jan says that the guitar "looks too modern," and he replaced it with "a vintage jazz model with an oval sound-hole," so audiences would not consider him "a rock-and-roller" (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 1). The guitar represents rock music and is a typical object that symbolizes modern life. A similar description is also found in "Come Rain or Come Shine." At the story's beginning, Ishiguro writes several types of music to indicate the difference between past and present:

"Today, a young person's likely to listen to any sort of music. My nephew... is going through his Argentinian tango phase. He also likes Edith Piaf as well as any number of the latest indie bands. But in our day tastes weren't nearly so diverse. My fellow students fell into two broad camps: the hippie types with their long hair and flowing garments who liked 'progressive rock', and the neat, tweedy ones who considered anything other than classical music a horrible din" (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 23).

The difference in musical taste and appearance of musical lovers constitute the contrast between past and present. The kinds of music become more and more diverse nowadays. Correspondingly, some classic musicians who are well known for acclaimed records in the 20th century, such as Tony Gardner in "Crooner," are gradually erased by pop stars and become "some crooner from a bygone era" (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 11). Yet today is the era of consumerism characterized by the broad use of social media, in which celebrity status changes rapidly. The audience focuses more on the exposure of musicians and the byproducts created by music instead of the music itself, such as advertisements, magazines, and gossip related to musicians. To successfully return to the circle of singers, Tony Gardner needed some affairs for heated discussion to draw public concern, so he chose to depart with his wife, Lindy Gardner. Ironically, this situation is universally accepted in the musical industry:

"Look at the ones from my generation still hanging round. Every single one of them, they've remarried. Twice, sometimes three times. Every one of them, young wives on their arms... Lindy knows the score. She's known it longer than I have... We've talked it over. She understands it's time to go our separate ways." (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 21)

Although making many changes hard, Tony Gardner and Lindy Gardner still dissolved the marriage timely to create "the right love affairs, the right marriages, the right divorces" (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 94). One seeks another young wife, and the other withdraws in time before she gets old. Such a matter of changing necessity is presented in celebrities and ordinary individuals. For survival, most characters in *Nocturnes* have no chance to do something they really want but do something they must. In the real world, each is just "a jobbing tenor man" and has to play what the audience most likely appreciates (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 87). Such as Jan in "Crooner," Steve in "Nocturnes," and Tilo and Sonja in "Malvern Hills," going from band to band, country to country, and playing popular music. Besides, their talents are hidden, and their dreams are not understood and acknowledged completely, just as the unnamed composer in "Malvern Hills" and Eloise in "Cellists," both of them run into obstacles everywhere.

With the presentation of music and musicians' agitated lives in *Nocturnes*, Ishiguro depicts a modern world where people are hard to know "where to settle" and "what to settle to" (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 58). It is difficult for characters to take control of their fate, and a sense of loneliness and disillusionment is pervasive in their lives. Their affections are repressed, and the connection between people is fragile. All of those reflect the aspect of modern people's living predicaments: alienation.

3. Music and Disillusionment of Self-Value

Alienation is often associated with "stark contradiction and being defeated in expectation or hope," which is an essential aspect of disillusionment of self-value (Maher, 2020, p. 947). In *Nocturnes*, modern people's disillusionment of self-value is presented through the description of the characters' shattered dreams in which

music and story are intertwined. By this means, music becomes a symbol of the disillusionment of various musicians, showing the vast gap between harsh reality and the beautiful ideals modern people face.

The third story, “Malvern Hills,” begins with an unnamed guitarist and composer chasing his dream in London. With hope and expectation, he is “on foot with a fairly crappy acoustic dream” but keeps hitting dead ends (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 62). He is a nobody with no money, so no matter how much the interviewers like his voice or rhythm work, they turn him away. Unable to be respected and treated fairly, he finally realizes the corruption and hypocrisy of the music industry in London: “...there was something if not utterly rotten, then at least extremely shallow and inauthentic about what was going down here, right at the grass-roots level” (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 63). After months of wandering in London, he returns to Malvern Hill and temporarily works in his sister’s restaurant. Although his time in London was an exciting interlude, he still feels anxious and confused about his future. He gets paranoid about running into his former university friends when going through CDs. His brother-in-law Geoff considers his music a piece of noise interrupting his relaxing time; his sister Maggie also bears his perseverance and efforts out, saying his work is not “quite on the same level” as her husband’s (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 81). Instead of feeling angry about his family’s misunderstanding of songwriting, he is more upset for insisting on his music dream, especially his frustration with proving his talent and ability. Therefore, his feeling of uneasiness comes from his music dreams actually. Music is the trigger that makes the old restlessness return.

In the fifth story, “Cellists,” Tibor is also a young man of failure in self-realization, who is passionate about music at first but loses his drive and ambition eventually. His different attitudes toward music show the disillusionment of self-value. Tibor is a Hungarian music student on the edge of penury. However, he just sits in the square aimlessly and becomes “a romantic fool” (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 134). He prefers to get an opportunity that someone who can acknowledge his talents in music rather than work for a living. Eloise McCormack, an unrecognized virtuoso, finds his potential and encourages him to play cello with highly personal characteristics instead of the public version. The communication of music with Eloise opens “a garden” that Tibor has “never seen before” (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 141). Although his friend Ernesto offers him a job, he responds coolly and shows no fawning gratitude. Friends around Tibor do not understand his behavior and think that “that woman turned him into an arrogant little shit” (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 148). However, after finding Eloise is a “fake” musician, he is pretty dispirited and cannot face himself. Meanwhile, Eloise McCormack’s departure has caught Tibor again in the trouble of chasing fame and fortune, insisting on himself, and lost in disillusionment. Be tossed around in reality, he finally lost the “youthful anxiety” and “those careful manners” (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 155). For Tibor, the music dream is his purpose and represents the certificate of self-value. When the belief is crumbling, he loses himself in disillusionment.

In “Malvern Hills” and “Cellist,” the characters’ music dreams conflict with harsh reality. The identity of “losers” in music creation made them gradually lose confidence and faith. As the recurring image in the narration, music interprets the characters’ expectations, stress, confusion, and disappointment in realizing their beautiful ideals, convening modern people’s disillusionment of self-realization.

4. Music and Self-Estrangement

Most characters in *Nocturnes* are unable to prove themselves because of underappreciated talent. Some of them take a shortcut to fame, for instance, divorce and cosmetic surgery. Sometimes, their choices are accompanied by disappointment, unwillingness, and concealment of their authentic selves, which gives them a strong feeling of powerlessness going with self-estrangement. It shows in the characters’ inner conflict of “To Be or Not to Be” through music.

In “Come Rain or Come Shine,” Raymond is regarded as a representative of failure. His abject life has become a tool to consolidate his friend Emily and Charlie’s marriage—“To be Mr. Perspective” to prove Charlie’s superiority (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 33). Although he and Emily both have similar interests in music, he has to play dumb when bringing up musical topics because Emily has belittled Charlie in the area of musical taste. After a moment’s hesitation, Raymond promises that he will never talk about music with Emily. Therefore, he pretends that he does not like Jazz anymore, does not listen to it, and even forgets the happy time of discussing music with Emily around the record player. But all of that is not what Raymond wants to do. Filled with tears, he “stepped outside” and “wiped them without Emily noticing” (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 59). Music is the medium of communication and memory carrier. By depicting Raymond’s behavior, psychological status, and discourse with Emily, Raymond’s conflict between being real and fake is presented.

Furthermore, the inner conflict through the presentation of music can also be found in the fourth story, “Nocturnes.” At the story’s beginning, Steve, a saxophonist, makes a series of statements about his identity:

“...a movie producer, maybe, or an actor or a musician. Well, I’m a musician all right...I’m not what you’d

call big-league...I'm just a jobbing tenor man, in reasonable demand for studio work, or when a band's lost their regular guy. If it's pop they want, it's pop I play. R&B? Fine. Car commercials, the walk-on theme for a talk show, I'll do it. I'm a jazz player these days only when I'm inside my cubicle" (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 87).

The above description of Steve reflects that he cannot accurately indicate his primary identity. Different jobs in music make him feel confused about himself. At the same time, people around him tell him that the ugliness hindered his success. As a musician, he never doubts his talent and treats face surgery and media hype with scorn:

"I was twice as talented as most other people in this town. But it seemed that didn't count for much these days. Because it has to do with image, marketability, being in magazines and on TV shows, about parties and who you ate lunch with. It all made me sick...maybe some day, just maybe, genuine music lovers would hear me and appreciate what I was doing. What did I want with a plastic surgeon?" (Ishiguro, 2009, pp. 89–90).

Although he has principles in music, he finally succumbs to reality. His change towards cosmetic surgery and celebrities is capricious, along with self-loathing. He initially hates Lindy Gardner, who he thinks has no talent but has become popular with plastic surgery and scandals. However, he eventually becomes such a person. In his mind, he is not a jazz musician anymore but "just another pathetic hustler," getting his face "fixed in a bid to crawl after the Lindy Gardners of this world into a vacuous celebrity" (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 94). More ironically, he makes friends with Lindy and accepts the rule of struggle in modern society. "The toughest part" for him was not being able to play his sax, but now he is used to this life and passes "the hours quite contentedly" (Ishiguro, 2009, pp. 96, 130). He is no longer satisfied with his inner music pursuit but sells his talent to celebrities. Steve and Lindy, both wearing a bandage mask, stay away from their authentic self.

In "Come Rain or Come Shine" and "Nocturnes," Raymond and Steve are both victims of self-estrangement. They construct a delusion around themselves by telling lies and rejecting to face their true selves, which is developed by presenting the characters' psychological status with music. Through the plot and discourse related to music, the inner conflict between the authentic self and the false self is shown, indicating the self-estrangement of modern people.

5. Music and Social Isolation

Alienation is not only presented on an individual level but also in social relationships between people, especially in intimate relationships. In *Nocturnes*, the characters' intimate relationship is always tense, distant, and fragile. However, their relationship with unfamiliar people, even those whom they first knew, is characterized by comfort, relaxation, and closeness. The contrast between the two relationships indicates the alienation in social bonding and intimacy.

In "Crooner," Tony Gardner invites the narrator, Jan, to play guitar for solo singing, which surprises Gardner's wife, Lindy. From Jan's perspective, it is such a romantic thing for Gardner to make a well-planned event for his wife: "It seemed such a sweet idea, this couple—he in his sixties, she in her fifties—behaving like teenagers in love" (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 8). But Jan senses something wrong. Tony Gardner and Lindy Gardner decide to divorce. They are together because of money and beauty, separating for fame and fortune. Love is consumable and random for the couple in a society of restless competition and material supremacy. Hidden beneath the fragile marriage is the alienated relationship between wife and husband.

Couples alienated from each other not only for some objective factors, such as money and fame, but also for their differences in musical interests and pursuits. More significantly, they are reluctant to respect and understand each other. In "Come Rain or Come Shine," Emily and Raymond became great friends because of music. Although Charlie knows Emily loves old American popular songs and likes to collect LPs (long-playing records), he still changes some records to CDs and does not let her listen. Emily told Raymond that she hadn't "listened to this record for ages. It's because of Charlie". If she puts "this sort of music on, he immediately starts groaning" (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 61). For Charlie, which music Emily likes seems unimportant. This non-acceptance of music leads to difficulties in family involvement. Such a situation also exists in "Malvern Hills." Since traveling to many countries for play, Tilo and Sonja do not have enough time to take care of their son. The absence of parents in childhood is a crucial reason for alienation in family relationships, and it is hard to compensate for the past. Therefore, Tilo and Sonja's son replies nothing to their messages and does not see them when they have a concert in Düsseldorf, where their son is living. What's more, the story of Tilo and Sonja is narrated from the perspective of the unnamed composer, who at first dislikes them and then becomes close to them while sharing and discussing music. For him, Tilo and Sonja are not only musicians but also good friends who give respect to

his songs:

“Though I couldn’t see their faces, the whole way they remained snuggled up to each other with no hint of restlessness told me they were enjoying what they were hearing. When I finished, they turned to me with big smiles and applauded, sending echoes around the hills” (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 74).

The encounter with Tilo and Sonja is an ecstatic and precious interlude for the young man. However, this has never happened with his sister: “In all the time I’d been in her house, she hadn’t once asked to hear a song, the way Tilo and Sonja had done” (Ishiguro, 2009, p. 81). Encouragement and unwillingness, two opposing attitudes towards his song, show the remote family relationship.

Through characters’ stories revolve around music, four relationships are depicted: wife and husband, parents and son, sister and brother, and relationships among musicians and musical lovers. Those relationships are closely related to music. One couple gets away from each other for music pursuit; the other couple loses their temper for musical taste; parents and son, sister and brother, are reluctant to understand their ideals in music; while musicians and musical lovers can respect and share music. Under the estranged love among intimate relationships and close connections among unfamiliar people is the social isolation of *Nocturnes*.

6. Conclusion

By inserting musical elements in the narration frequently, *Nocturnes* uses music as a medium to point out the social background of modern life, to portray the confused and disillusioned characters, and to depict their isolated relationship. In a word, music fulfills the thematic construction of *Nocturnes*: alienation. It helped to portray a modern world where people often face dilemmas in choice along with agitated and unsettled lives and serves as a clue to show the character’s psychological status, mood, and plot development. As a symbol, music also conveys the connotative meanings of alienation in individuals and social relationships: disillusionment of self-value, self-estrangement, and social isolation. Therefore, *Nocturnes* can be regarded as an “unharmonious concerto” of modern people’s living predicaments, which shows Ishiguro’s concern for the alienation in modern life, giving a remarkable expression for integrating music and literature.

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Yu and Gong were responsible for the study design and revising. Gong drafted the manuscript, and Yu revised it. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript and contributed equally to the study.

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