

Chapter 8: *Nocturnes*, hope, and ‘that croony nostalgia music’

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Ishiguro remarked in 2000 that nostalgia, in its purest form as ‘a profound emotion’, is ‘to the emotions what idealism is to the intellect’ - a way of ‘longing for a better world’ (Knopf Publicity, 2000). Ishiguro’s preoccupation with nostalgia, the aching sense of desire and longing for home or the past, in many ways matches his concerns with memory. Christopher Banks’s return to Shanghai in *When We Were Orphans* (2000) was not so much about rooting out evil as it was to retrieve lost objects, people and moments from his past. Banks’s departure from Shanghai as a child bears echoes of Ishiguro’s own departure from Nagasaki to England at the age of five, departing without the chance to bid a genuine farewell to home.

Nocturnes (2009), when compared with the scholarly attention received for his novels, seems to have been neglected to some extent. This could be due in part to the lack of sustained exploration of the psychological and emotional arcs of Ishiguro’s characters in contrast to his novels (Wong, 2019: 171-72), which can be attributed to the use of the short story form in the collection.¹ Ishiguro’s previous novels depict intense nostalgic moments

that complicate the boundaries between individual history and the imagination, and this is true for *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *When We Were Orphans*. The Judy Bridgewater music tape that Tommy bought in Cromer to replace the one that Kathy had lost stirs up feelings of 'nostalgia' for Hailsham and the Cromer trip (Ishiguro, 2005: 159). The implausible voice of Christopher Banks's old friend Akira in war-torn Shanghai advocates for nostalgia as a way to remember a 'better' world (Ishiguro, 2000: 263). The childhood longing for a better world carries with it a utopian impulse, one that is in further evidence within *Nocturnes*. Scenes of nostalgia often lead to 'imaginary utopian spaces' (Waugh, 2011: 16) in his novels, however he structures his examination of these themes differently in the collection. Ishiguro employs the musical forms and themes from jazz standards in the Great American Songbook in exploring the complicated relationship between the fleeting quality of nostalgia, and the persistence of memory and loss. Unlike the use of nostalgia as a tool in resisting forgetting in *Never Let Me Go* (Teo, 2014: 91-92), in *Nocturnes* it seems to have a less combative and more restorative function of longing and desire. It is certainly tempting to consider Ishiguro's collection of stories as an ode to the Great American Songbook, and a straightforward portrayal of nostalgic longing. This would however miss the more subtle (but crucial) discussions on time, imaginary homelands and utopia that lie just beneath the surface. This chapter examines Ishiguro's unique exploration of nostalgia through the five stories, and his meditations on fleeting utopian moments in the vignettes featured in the collection. Beginning with the concept of home, the discussion first examines the desire to return to a more innocent and stable time, triggered by the characters' dissatisfaction with the present. This will be followed by an analysis of the utopian spaces generated through nostalgic reminiscence, as well as Ishiguro's development of a critical and reflective form of nostalgia through the stories in the collection. The study finishes by looking at how Ishiguro

utilises the form of the short story collection to further highlight the powerful and yet elusive qualities of nostalgia.

Longing for Home

Nostalgia, a word described by Svetlana Boym as ‘pseudo-Greek’ and coined by a Swiss student named Johannes Hofer in 1688, comes from *nóstos* describing a ‘return home’, and *álgos* which indicates ‘longing’ (Boym, 2011). Boym goes on to define nostalgia as ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed’. The sense of longing for home in nostalgia carries with it elements of the mythical, the imagination, and memory. In this study I take a more expansive interpretation of what returning home means. In Boym’s seminal *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), she describes modern nostalgia as a mourning of the loss of ‘an enchanted world with clear borders and values’ as well as a longing for ‘a home that is both physical and spiritual’ (2001: 8). The concept of home in *Nocturnes* can be linked to specific places, such as Janeck’s memories of his mother’s record collection in the former communist bloc in ‘Crooner’, but in other stories home refers to a specific period of time such as Ray’s university days with Emily and Charlie in ‘Come Rain or Come Shine’.

The stories in the collection exhibit alternate expressions of the concept of home: a world that is idealised and reshaped through memory and imagination. These ‘imaginary homelands’ (Rushdie, 1991: 10), as described by Salman Rushdie in 1991, are not indicative of an idealised physical home country, but of a particular time, place or feeling from the past. Rushdie comments that writers who are ‘exiles or emigrants or expatriates’ are ‘haunted by some sense of loss’, and that in responding to the urge to look back, it will not

be a return to the exact country or place of origin, but versions that are fictions and homes 'of the mind' (Rushdie, 1991: 10). The return home for a number of characters in *Nocturnes* is tinged with nostalgia for a more innocent, happier or safer time, but these are memories that have been affected by loss and mediated through the imagination. Both Janeck and Tibor, Italian-based musicians from the stories 'Crooner' and 'Cellists' that bookend the collection, are emigrants from the former Iron Curtain (197). Janeck, working as an itinerant guitarist among the cafe orchestras at Venice's iconic Piazza San Marco, recognises the American singer Tony Gardner, and immediately thinks of his late mother and her love for his records. Within the first person narrative, Janeck thinks back to the 'communist days' when it was difficult for his mother to find American records, and how years later working in Warsaw, Janeck would seek out those records on the black market, and spent a few years finding replacements to his mother's worn copies (6). This reflection, built around poignant memories of her mother's love for music and his relationship with her, thinly veils a sense of loss for his mother through his determination in making amends for damaging one of her treasured Tony Gardner records. In a period of over three years, he found replacements for all her worn-out Gardner records, including the one that he damaged, and brought them to her 'one by one' each time her went to see her (6). This sense of repetition and ritual of bringing her a Gardner replacement from the black market extended beyond just replacing the damaged record, and became a means by which Janeck reconnected with his mother each time he returned to see her. The narration's emphasis on not only the time frame of this quest, but the persistent energy where he 'kept getting them' so that he could 'bring her another' (6), brings a psychological insight into the strength of feeling regarding his relationship with his mother, as well as the importance placed on this particular fragment of home, a home of childhood memories.

Home carries with it associations of hearth and of safety. For the characters in *Nocturnes*, the concept of home is intertwined with ideas of family life, relationships, experiences of the Cold War and foreign cultural artefacts, including American popular music. The blurb on the dust jacket of *Nocturnes* describes the characters encountered in the stories as ranging from 'young dreamers to cafe musicians to faded stars, all of them at some moment of reckoning', connected by the 'struggle to keep alive a sense of life's romance' (Ishiguro, 2009). These narratives of dreamers and old stars represent the confluence of idealism, disappointment and longing, in particular, a longing for a time that is perceived to be a happier one; whilst being in exile or being a migrant compounds this emotion further. Through this collection of stories, Ishiguro creates a utopian environment, an 'imagined community of dreaming strangers' (Boym, 2000: 256), who simultaneously long for home and long to be away from home.² In 'Crooner', Janeck, an emigrant musician in Venice, recalls poignant childhood memories triggered by his encounter with Tony Gardner. Tibor, another emigrant in 'Cellists' based in a different Italian city, is an ambitious musician who is proud of his classical training pedigree until his meeting with Eloise McCormack.

The urge to return to a place of stability is apparent in 'Come Rain or Come Shine'. The London-based couple Emily and Charlie are going through 'a bit of a sticky patch' (43), and on one of his visits from Spain to see them, Ray is tasked by Charlie to make himself seem inferior to Charlie, in order that Emily will reappraise Charlie's worth and become reconciled with him. Charlie is aware that Ray has a unique connection with Emily through their shared love of popular jazz standards and the Great American Songbook. Ray is, for

Charlie, the epitome of the nostalgic past. He asks Ray to avoid engaging in music-related conversations with Emily, whilst also asking Ray to do the impossible by being his 'natural self' (63). Charlie views nostalgia from a purely functional perspective – as a tool to get Emily into a happier frame of mind whilst allowing for the more negative aspects of nostalgia to manifest themselves. Emily would realise that Ray had not progressed in life as much as she and Charlie have, and Charlie would come out in a better light. Towards the end of the story, we find that Charlie's plan is flawed, as Emily's intellectual and emotional connection with Ray is very much grounded in music, and to avoid the subject is to risk rousing Emily's suspicions that not everything is as it seems. Emily puts on a Sarah Vaughan record, which Ray insists he no longer remembers and that he does not listen to that kind of music anymore. Sarah is stunned by this, insisting that '[t]hings can't change that much' (83). Sarah's response underlines the subtleties of nostalgia's power, representing a flawed hope that certain things dating back to the past would, somehow, remain the same. Her instincts prove to be right in this instance however, as Ray tries to keep to the promise he made to his best friend in not engaging with Sarah on 'that croony nostalgia music' they both still love (63). Ray's comment moments later about the difficulty in 'know[ing] where to settle... [w]hat to settle to' (85), encapsulates the sense of restlessness that they both experience; for Sarah, in not really knowing if Charlie is still the right person for her, and for Ray, in being uncertain about which country to settle in. Both characters in different ways long for a version of home, but are unsure of how to reach it, or know what it might look like.

Space, Nostalgia and Utopia

The perception of nostalgia as a yearning for the past that holds one back from living in the present carries with it a strong element of truth, but this sentiment does tend to gloss over

the fallible aspect of memory, and the irrecoverable nature of the past. The past that is yearned for by the remembering subject is mediated through time and imagination. Linda Hutcheon asserts that nostalgia is not about the past 'as actually experienced', but is about the projection of an idealised present into the past (2000: 20). This relates to the utopian aspect of nostalgia that addresses the 'longing for a better world' spoken about by Ishiguro (Knopf Publicity, 2000). Pickering and Keightley argue for the wider acceptance of nostalgia as a 'contradictory phenomenon' that retains both 'utopian impulses' and 'melancholic responses to disenchantment', with both dimensions mutually informing each other (2006: 936, 921). This allows for a positive quality of nostalgia to be made manifest, where the desire to return to an idealised past can be seen as a search 'for ontological security in the past', and the desire not to return but 'recognize aspects of the past' becomes the basis for 'renewal and satisfaction in the future' in the midst of present uncertainty (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 921). Varying dimensions of nostalgia are also reflected in Boym's conceptions of restorative and reflective forms in her 2001 book. In Ishiguro's story cycle, the characters' dissatisfaction with the present leads to their longing and struggle for a sense of 'life's romance' mentioned in the book's dust jacket. However, what they long for is not the actual past that happened, but one that has been 'idealized through memory and desire' (Hutcheon, 2000: 20).

Citing Mikhail Bakhtin, Hutcheon notes that the ideal life that is not being lived in the present gets projected into the past, and consequently nostalgia is often not really about the past, but about one's dissatisfaction or disillusionment concerning the present (Hutcheon, 2000: 20). Hutcheon observes that this process 'exiles' and distances us from the present, whilst drawing closer an imagined and idealised past that feels more 'complete,

stable, coherent, safe' (2000: 20). The nostalgic past occurs as utopian spaces in Ishiguro's fiction. These spaces are revealed as representations of imaginary homelands for the characters in *Nocturnes*, facilitated through musical themes that trigger happy memories of childhood and youth, forgotten romance, and faded dreams. Patricia Waugh defines these 'imaginary utopian spaces' in Ishiguro's writing as worlds 'produced out of nostalgic longing' that are 'necessary lies' we tell ourselves in order to survive (Waugh, 2011: 16). She argues that these spaces can sustain the remembering subject and provide consolation, but warns of their potential of keeping past injustices hidden (Waugh, 2011: 16). This describes a duality to nostalgia in *Nocturnes*, where at times it seems to represent utopian longing, and at other times it indicates the inability to move on from the past. Music is utilised to establish utopian spaces in the story cycle, allowing for characters who seek solace and consolation to find a site of stability. These spaces, and how each character negotiates their way within them, constitute a unique meditation on nostalgia's power, typified by a yearning to return to a happier or more familiar time. 'Cellists', narrated from the perspective of one of the piazza café musicians, tells the story one summer seven years ago of Tibor, a classically-trained Hungarian cellist who was attending the unnamed Italian city's Arts and Culture Festival. Aside from getting to know members of the café band, the story centres around his encounter with Eloise McCormack over a brief period, an American music enthusiast who saw herself as a virtuoso despite not having progressed with the cello beyond the age of eleven. Believing her pretence of being a virtuoso musician, Tibor takes up her offer of tutoring him to unlock his hidden potential. After one of these sessions, while having refreshments in a cafe, their conversation leads to an interesting observation Eloise makes about Tibor's playing. Despite Tibor's insistence that he does not love a German girl he once knew, Eloise insists that he must have experienced romantic love, as he

played a passage in a Rachmaninov piece in a manner evoking ‘the *memory* of love’, along with its associations of ‘desertion, abandonment’ (205). Eloise observes further that the movement is usually played with joy by most cellists, but that Tibor interprets this movement like ‘the memory of a joyful time that’s gone for ever’ (205). The narrative does not expand further on this point, nor does this particular subject return again in the story (apart from the poignant farewells toward the end). This might be reflective of some of the limitations of the short story format for Ishiguro’s writing style, or issues that Ishiguro has had in engaging with his usual themes in the collection. Nonetheless, this scene between Tibor and Eloise, and Eloise’s words mentioned above in particular, crystallise the collection’s meditations on nostalgia. Tibor’s playing summons these utopian spaces, evoking the bittersweet act of remembering past romantic love or a happier time that is ‘gone for ever’, along with the associated pain of displacement and exile. This bittersweet quality of nostalgia is a refrain that runs through many of the stories in *Nocturnes*, and is reminiscent of the phrase ‘music and nightfall’ in the collection’s subtitle, where the imminent sunrise is indicative of the fleeting nature of pleasure. This powerful sentiment is evocative of *ukiyo-e*, the traditional style of Japanese art that seeks to capture the ‘transient pleasure-seeking world’ that the painter Masuji Ono is surrounded by in *An Artist of the Floating World* from 1986 (Teo, 2014: 119). In the novel, Ono’s mentor Seiji Moriyama sets his goal of capturing the ‘transitory, illusory qualities’ of the beauty in pleasure houses after dark, a beauty that will ‘vanish with the morning’ (150).

The vignettes, depicted through the short story form, offer a meditation by Ishiguro on the elusive and fragmentary nature of the nostalgic utopian spaces depicted. Nostalgia, according to Boym, is an act of defiance against the linear flow of ‘modern’ time: the

remembering subject '[refuses] to surrender to the irreversibility of time', yearning for childhood or a time of 'slower rhythms' (Boym, 2011). This rebellion against the modern concept of time interrupts its irreversible flow, and generates utopian spaces. But despite these acts of resistance, the elusive quality of the fictionalised and nostalgic past remains. Following a comical and absurdist turn of events at Charlie and Emily's home, Raymond finds himself at his wit's end trying to explain his actions to Emily. Emily decides to put on some music that she knew Ray would be familiar with. It is a Sarah Vaughan record, and after a brief moment protesting that he is no longer interested in that style of music, Ray agrees to Emily's request to dance to 'April in Paris' outside on the terrace. As we have known all along, Ray had been lying to Emily in order to keep a promise he made to Charlie. He is in fact very familiar with the track, and knows that it is at least eight minutes long. As Ray holds Emily closely, his senses are 'filled with the texture of her clothes, her hair, her skin' (86). The song and the intimacy of the dance creates a temporary utopian space where '[they] were safe' as they '[danced] under the starlit sky' (86). This space of safety is an idealised present, and Ray is very much aware that this moment lasting eight minutes, like all nostalgic moments, is fleeting. He observes at the end of the story that this intimate moment will likely fade once the song ends. Ishiguro deliberately utilises the short story format to ensure that the characters' nostalgic returns are brief and fleeting, highlighting nostalgia's elusive nature. While this is not as sustained a meditation on a theme as compared to a number of his novels, there is evidence here of a critical perspective concerning nostalgia despite some of the limitations of the short story format.

A Reflective and Critical Nostalgia

Ishiguro has in the past lamented the common 'pejorative' understanding of nostalgia as a form of escapism and 'political and historical' evasion (Shaffer, 2008: 166). He prefers to view the 'pure emotion' of nostalgia as something that can positively influence people to imagine and pursue a better future, drawing inspiring from childhood memories (Shaffer, 2008: 166-67). However, even within Ishiguro's fiction there seems to be a tension between both evasive and inspirational forms of nostalgia, and this includes the stories within *Nocturnes*. For example in *When We Were Orphans*, Banks's naive attempt at restoring peace during the Japanese invasion of Shanghai not only leaves him with further complications concerning his family's past, but also the realisation that it was finally time for him to leave his long-held childhood idealism behind (277). The excruciatingly long wait for Ryder's piano recital in *The Unconsolable* ultimately leads to the disappointment of an almost empty auditorium (519), and the regret of not being able to fulfil a long-standing wish for his parents to attend one of his major concerts (512). Ishiguro's characters' yearning for the past in *Nocturnes* appears on the surface to be initiated by pejorative forms of nostalgia that leave them shackled to the past, unable to move forward with their lives. Many of the stories tell of music being used as a tool to revisit past happiness and old glories, with mostly inconclusive outcomes. The form of the short story collection employed here certainly aids in representing the elusive quality of nostalgia and memory. One might ask if this is indeed the thematic conclusion to reading *Nocturnes*, that in spite of the occasional utopian spaces found in these stories, the positive aspect of nostalgia as something that can inspire a better world is an elusive quality and one that is ultimately undermined by the narrative. If the story cycle is only concerned with the wistful and elusive nature of nostalgia, signposted through allusions to the era of the Great American Songbook (with the

exception of 'Malvern Hills'), then one might be inclined to see *Nocturnes* as a less fulfilling read. Delving further into the complexities of nostalgic experiences in the stories reveals a more reflective and critical element at play.

Charlie's longing for home, represented by his appeal to Ray to 'make everything okay again' with his struggling marriage in 'Come Rain or Come Shine' (44), is a wish that is likely to be impossible to fulfil, as such a wish does not take into account the irretrievable nature of the past and the changes that people undergo throughout their lifetimes. Rather than accepting the changes to their individual lives and relationship and finding a way forward, Charlie is desperate for a return to the past as how he remembers it, a time of stability between him and Emily as though 'the last two months haven't happened' (44). In 'Crooner', Tony Gardner's plans to romantically serenade his wife Lindy, in spite of the impending end to their marriage, are an attempt at recapturing the sense of romance that dates back to their visits to Venice and London twenty-seven years ago. As Tony and Lindy plan to separate after their holiday, this trip to Venice and the performance bookends their marriage. As Tony discusses the plans for serenading Lindy with Janeck, his thoughts turn to the current state of his relationship with Lindy and the happier times they have had over the years. When he has finished recounting the story of the significance of the song 'I Fall in Love Too Easily' to the early memories of their marriage, Janeck observes Tony 'wiping away tears' (23). For Janeck, however, his encounter with Tony revives his memories of his late mother and her love of Tony Gardner's music. Unlike for Tony, that night's performance does not herald an end for Janeck, but rather it helps rekindle and restore the memory of his mother. Upon first hearing Tony's voice in front of him in the gondola during their practice of 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix', Janeck is transported back to being 'a boy again,

back in that apartment' where his tired mother is sitting on the sofa listening to one of Tony's records (14-15). The song, 'full of travelling and goodbye', is a poignant reminder of his mother's inability to leave her sadness behind her (27). For both characters, these American jazz and pop standards trigger memories of happier times with their loved ones. The past, however, appears to have a hold on these two characters. Even with the looming separation, there seems to be unspoken intimacies and intense feelings both Tony and Lindy have for each other that remain unresolved at the crossroads, and while Tony's nostalgic longings indicate the presence of old memories of their relationship, there is no impetus to try and come to an alternative solution. Janeck seems to be partially tied to a child's point of view. After witnessing Tony's tears as described above, he tries to comfort and reassure him by recalling how much his music helped his mother during times of sadness and relationship crises. Janeck's words to Tony start off in a mature and hopeful voice, but it gradually descends into a naive optimism where he declares if Tony's music could help 'millions of others', that it should be capable of helping him too (24). Ishiguro's narrative creates a confrontation between Janeck's childhood view of the trials and tribulations of finding love with Tony's adult world of ruthless pragmatism and celebrity consciousness.

Moments like the ones discussed above are examples of the more pejorative impression of nostalgia that Ishiguro is wary of, one that is indicative of 'escapism of a bad sort', or something that 'impedes people from doing things properly' (Shaffer, 2008: 166). However, by taking a slightly different view of the stories and investigating the nostalgic qualities of the music that are sought after by a number of characters, and considering some of the links between the theme of music and the form of the collection, we can observe a more reflective and critical nostalgia at work. We first begin by considering the bittersweet

nature of the longings associated with nostalgia. There is a palpable sense of desire, even addiction in some instances, for these nostalgic emotions by characters in the stories. Music in *Nocturnes* encapsulates the bittersweet memories of an inaccessible past. Nostalgia's power and appeal is dependent on the 'irrecoverable' nature of the past (Hutcheon, 2000: 19-20), intensifying that sense of yearning for what has been lost forever, whether it be a person, a place, or a feeling. The quest for these bittersweet experiences through music, embarked upon by both performers and listeners, is exemplified in most of the stories, beginning with American pop and jazz standards in 'Crooner'. As Janeck begins playing an introduction on his guitar for 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix', he tries to make it sound 'like America, sad roadside bars, big long highways' (27). The sense of sadness, isolation and loneliness experienced by the singing subject accompanies many of the songs from the Great American Songbook. In the opening pages of 'Come Rain or Come Shine', Ray recalls the early days of his friendship with Emily and their mutual appreciation for American jazz standards. He remembers a particular instance when they discover a recording of 'Come Rain or Come Shine' by Ray Charles, where, as he describes it, 'the words themselves were happy, but the interpretation was pure heartbreak' (38). The space of heartbreak opened up by these songs makes accessible the previously inaccessible past. Returning to the concept of home, standing for a happy, ordered and simpler (idealised) past, these songs allow for the weary soul to return home momentarily while distancing themselves from the troubles of the present. Steve, the jazz saxophonist in 'Nocturne', recovering from the facial plastic surgery that is hoped would revive his music career, has a series of encounters and meetings with Lindy Gardner (from 'Crooner' and who has also had facial surgery) in the Beverly Hills hotel they are both recovering in. Lindy asks to listen to Steve's music, and when he plays her his signature track on the CD player 'The Nearness of You', Steve extols to

the reader the unique interpretation of this jazz standard by his band and his saxophone playing. He claims that 'there are colors there, longings and regrets' at certain moments in the track (154). We observe here that once again nostalgic emotions of yearning, wistfulness and sadness are channelled through the music. As described earlier, Eloise in 'Cellists' explains to Tibor a quality concerning his musicianship that speaks of 'desertion, abandonment', and the memory of the joy of love (205). These quests to experience the bittersweet emotions that accompany music-based triggers of memories point to a more active form of engagement for the remembering subject. John J. Su argues that nostalgia provides a way of 'imagining more fully what has been and continues to be absent' (Su, 2005: 9). These experiences force characters to confront and engage with loss in imaginative ways, and to perhaps reach a point where they are more capable of acknowledging the complex origins of their regret or longing. The creation of an imagined and more idealised version of the past 'merges with a dissatisfaction with the present' in these nostalgic moments (Hutcheon, 2000: 20), allowing for a momentary but profound sense of release that is coveted by the remembering subject.

While there is indeed evidence of a more profound meditation of nostalgia in the story cycle beyond a generalised impression of evasion and escapism, like many of Ishiguro's characters from his novels, there is no conclusive sense of what the remembering subject does at the conclusion of the stories, or if these nostalgic experiences relate to any subsequent life-altering decisions. Some of this is due to the brevity and form of the 'interrelated short story collection' used by Ishiguro (Whitehead, 2021: 37). The Gardners' marriage in 'Crooner' ends in a divorce as planned, and one assumes that Janeck is still an itinerant musician among the piazza cafe orchestras at the end. While Ray and Emily share

an intimate moment dancing on the terrace, there is a palpable sense of inevitability that their friendship will revert back to the way it was in the earlier part of 'Come Rain or Come Shine'. Tibor's summer-long encounter with Eloise in 'Cellist' comes to an abrupt end when Peter, who had been trying to win her affections, arrives in the city to find her. When the narrator sees Tibor again, it is seven years later back in the same city, with no conclusive information regarding his status as a musician. Like in 'Crooner', a marriage break-up paves the way for an attempt at rejuvenating a professional music career in 'Nocturne', with no further indication of how successful this next phase will be for Steve. 'Malvern Hills' is slightly different to the other stories, not only because of its countryside setting, but its focus on an older couple, Tilo and Sonja, who are both musicians and who perform together. Examining the nature of what keeps a relationship together, Ishiguro asks the question of what happens when a couple struggles to find things that they have in common, even in music. Similarly to 'Crooner' and 'Cellists', there is a younger aspiring musician, who also narrates the story, that the older characters form a temporary bond with. There are a few hints at the theme of nostalgia in this story: the protagonist who remembers as a child not being keen to go for walks in the hills with his family, but now with his parents divorced and the family home sold, feels 'affection, even nostalgia' for the area (94). When Tilo describes to the protagonist the music he and Sonja play as part of their act, the mention of bands like The Beatles, The Carpenters and ABBA evokes a sense of nostalgia for 1970s popular music. The ending, like the other stories, is inconclusive as the protagonist watches Tilo walking in the distance, having recently had a falling out with Sonja.

Ishiguro's meditations on nostalgia not only examine its utopian and reflective qualities, but its elusive and fleeting nature as well. The attraction of the wistful and

bittersweet experience of nostalgic spaces is often contrasted with a pervading sense of loss once the moment has passed. This eventually leads to an addiction for more of such moments, a longing to return to these stable, ordered and idealised versions of the past. In doing so, Ishiguro's writing in *Nocturnes* considers a third possibility in conceptualising nostalgia, beyond the more traditionally polarising options of nostalgia as either evasion or reflection. Through his utilisation of the short story form and the theme of music, Ishiguro's narrative confronts the reader with the contradictory nature of nostalgia as a (transient) source of hope for the future. It can be a timely reminder to the remembering subject of long forgotten passions and goals that fell by the wayside, while its fleeting and elusive nature means that the subject is always left having to reconcile their longings with the realities of present circumstances, and finding a way forward that allows them to fulfil their dreams.

Ishiguro's Use of Form

This collection of stories is ultimately about dreams and dreamers, and the difficulties of holding on to one's dreams and initial optimism for the future. There are moments when a character's dissatisfaction with circumstances in the present can trigger a nostalgic yearning. In the case of these dreamers, nostalgia becomes the means by which they are reminded of what is absent in their lives, while also being a useful, critical tool that brings to mind one's original goals and the circumstances that inspired them. Apart from the characters and their encounters with the past, the story cycle's form and internal structure exemplify aspects of the nature of nostalgia highlighted by Ishiguro.

The interrelated short story collection facilitates a loose thematic link across the five stories, comprising tales of hurt, disappointment and longing. Two of those stories, 'Crooner' and 'Malvern Hills', depict encounters between musicians from different generations. There is also present a more specific theme, one that is evident in each story, of the struggles that couples face at different stages of their relationships. The question about what happens when the number of things that a couple have in common begin to dwindle, and when there is a growing sense of estrangement within the relationship, is one that Ishiguro examines in his writing. These uncertainties come up again in his 2015 novel *The Buried Giant*, a profound meditation of the tenuous bond of memory and forgetting that keeps a couple together. Such thematic links help foster a sense of the communal nature of nostalgic experience between the different characters in *Nocturnes*, even if their specific narratives do not overlap (with the exception of Lindy Gardner's appearance in both 'Crooner' and 'Nocturne'). The short story form enables the portrayal of a small ensemble of characters who are at different turning points in their relationships and careers, creating the setting for Ishiguro's examination of the act of remembering, utilising a critical form of nostalgia to highlight the difficulties that arise for the characters who cling on to memories that are idealised.

Music has been a medium by which Ishiguro inscribes utopian spaces in his fiction, and this practice is not limited to music as a theme, but as form as well. His successful musical collaboration with Stacey Kent and Jim Tomlinson across several of Kent's albums from 2007 to the present is evidence of Ishiguro's continued interest in jazz and how his fictional narratives have another creative outlet through its musical form. Through his songwriting on the 2007 Kent songs 'The Ice Hotel', 'I Wish I Could Go Travelling Again' and

‘So Romantic’, there is a continuation of his themes of longing, regret and nostalgia (Teo, 2014: 87), while his lyrics to Kent’s ‘Breakfast on the Morning Tram’ from the same album is also a place to explore themes of utopian spaces initially portrayed at the end of *The Unconsole*d (Teo, 2014: 123). In *Nocturnes*, Ishiguro continues to inscribe utopian spaces within his fictional worlds through a number of musical genres including songs from the Great American Songbook, popular jazz, and classical music. These spaces as described above provide a unique meditation of nostalgia’s power, manifested in both its transformative potential to overcome loss, and its equally formidable efficacy in keeping an individual ensnared in the past. But what is also intriguing here is that Ishiguro channels the musical form and themes of popular jazz standards in depicting these stories, where a powerful sense of yearning for the past is depicted together with the inconclusive endings to each story, akin to the endings of songs on an album, and lending an elusive quality to the reminiscences. There are elements of improvisation to a number of stories that yield a comedic effect, such as the risky attempt at returning the stolen Jazz Musician of the Year trophy in ‘Nocturne’, or the ill-advised mission of staging a home invasion by a neighbour’s dog in order to cover up Ray’s crime of vandalising Emily’s diary in ‘Come Rain or Come Shine’. These moments do not last, however, as the narrative ultimately returns to some form of stability through the first person narrative voice, avoiding what Ray dismisses as ‘endless improvisations’ that ignore the precision of the ‘beautifully crafted songs’ found in jazz standards (37). The musical form of the collection informs the critical aspects of nostalgia that are being deployed in the story cycle.

There are admittedly some issues with the musical reference points featured in the collection, namely the utilisation of American music and culture from the 1920s to the

1960s. No doubt Ishiguro's affection for the Great American Songbook and American jazz standards permeates this collection, however, such a narrative strategy ultimately limits the scope of an otherwise engaging inquiry on memory, heartbreak, and nostalgic longing. In 'Cellists', even a conversation about performing the work of Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninov is led by an American (204). While a critique of how *Nocturnes* examines twentieth century American cultural hegemony goes beyond the scope of this discussion, it should be noted that the forms of nostalgic experiences depicted in the three jazz-themed stories are inflected by mid-twentieth century American popular music. Despite these influences, the function of *Nocturnes* as a text embodies, in both form and thematic content, the fleeting and elusive qualities of nostalgia. The collection functions as a 'musical text', weaving together 'a web of images, references and locutions' between the stories, as noted by Gerry Smyth (2011: 151-52). In his study of Ishiguro's musical imagination in *The Unconsoled* and *Nocturnes*, Smyth writes about the 'formative influence' that popular music has had on Ishiguro's generation of late-twentieth century British writers, and how music as a 'salient cultural form' can be utilised in a powerful way to understand the world and our relationship with it (Smyth, 2011: 145). Through his deployment of a range of musical references and connections, Ishiguro's musical text encourages the reader to be an 'active agent in the creation of meaning' (Smyth, 2011: 151). In doing so, Ishiguro creates narrative spaces where the active reader's music-inflected memories may be triggered by the characters' range of nostalgic responses across the stories.

Hope for the Future

In *Nocturnes*, Ishiguro utilises the concept of the short story collection as a critical form of nostalgia, one that acknowledges different ways of remembering the past as well as the

complications that accompany the longing to cling on to cherished memories. These memories are often related to imagined, fictive pasts that have more of a bearing on present difficulties and disappointments than they do to past events. Characters yearn for imaginary homelands that are not necessarily tied to an exact place of origin, but are instead indicative of homes in their minds that often relate to childhood memories of a more innocent, stable and safer time. Through the collection, Ishiguro creates what Boym calls an 'imagined community of dreaming strangers' (Boym, 2001: 256), a utopian environment where characters both long for home and long to be away from home. The characters' lives are encased in a unique story cycle and musical text in which the form and internal structure constitute a depiction of various facets of nostalgic experience that generates meaning for the active reader.

While spaces of nostalgic longing are capable of sustaining the remembering subject, Ishiguro, being wary of nostalgia's historical links with escapism and evasion, advocates for a more critical and reflective form of nostalgia, one that acknowledges its shortcomings as well as its potential to inspire positive change. This collection of stories portrays the lives of a community of dreamers, and the challenges they face of holding on to their dreams and hopes for the future. Nostalgia, Ishiguro contends in *Nocturnes*, is a (transient) source of hope for the future, one that comes as a timely reminder to the remembering subject of long forgotten dreams, while its fleeting nature challenges the subject to face up to their present circumstances.

Notes

1. Anne Whitehead's 2021 essay on *Nocturnes* helpfully considers the collection as an 'interrelated short story collection', placed in 'the interstices between short story and novel' and 'between literary fiction and musical album'. Anne Whitehead (2021), 'Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes* : Between Archive and Repertoire', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 67:1 (Spring 2021), p. 37.
2. This experience is described by Boym as being 'homesick' while also being 'sick of being at home' (Boym, 2011).

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