

Serious Playfulness: Humour in Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall

Sun, Jinglu
Graduate school of Humanities, Kyushu University : Doctoral Program

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Sun Jinglu

Introduction

Perhaps the least humorous thing to do is to analyse humour; as E. B. White's famous saying goes, "explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog. You understand it better but the frog dies in the process"(16). And no matter how "ostensibly pleasant" the attempt to adopt a critical approach to humour appears to be, the task can indeed be an arduous one – even the idea of doing it seems to be "sinister," as Michael Billig puts it in the acknowledgement and introduction of *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (1). However, humour, as an indispensable part of human nature and one of the essential elements in literature, has already been insightfully commented on by many scholars and is still worthy of serious discussions today.

In the 19th century Friedrich Nietzsche, the well-known German philosopher, in his *Beyond Good and Evil* affirms the value of "laughter" in "the moments of despair over the fact that 'nothing is becoming'" – "Perhaps, even if nothing else today has any future, our laughter has a future" (150); and from a psychological point of view, Sigmund Freud, another forerunner in this topic, points out that "jokes" might have been underestimated in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* – "jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life" (4); then in Terry Eagleton's recent academic work *Humour*, he justifies the serious attempt at approaching humour as "knowing how a joke works does not necessarily sabotage it, any more than knowing how a poem works ruins it" (9).

Though now the attempt to analyse humour may sound less "sinister," the process still remains full of pitfalls. For one thing, humour does not necessarily refer

to not only refer to pleasure and relaxation, it can also be serious, and sometimes even seriously offensive. As Noel Carroll points out, “some (much) humour, like satire, is engaged and serious” (43). There are “certain jokes that are beyond a joke,” which can “at least potentially, ‘ruin everything’” (Lockyer 2). Also, humour, as a method of discourse, has its own unruly “power” when it comes to racial, feminine, or political issues. However, those are not going to be the main focus of this paper. Instead, a gentler and more artistic facet of humour, as well as a serious playfulness in humour, is going to be taken into consideration.

Then there comes another question: is there much humour in Kazuo Ishiguro’s works? It seems not to be one of the first terms that comes to a reader’s mind when reading Ishiguro’s stories, for very often a certain “sad tone” can be noticed there. Perhaps it could be said that there has always been a “sad tone” in Ishiguro’s works, with many of his characters living with trauma, guilt or self-doubt, and with the recurring motifs of “broken families” and “disillusioned dreams.”

Firstly, as for “broken families,” there are mothers who lost children, such as Etsuko and Beatrice; and there are children on their way looking for mothers, such as Christopher Banks; also, there are children who have never had a mother, like the clones in Hailsham school. Besides mother-children relationships, there are also couples whose marriages are in crisis, such as Etsuko and Jiro, Axl and Beatrice.

Then, as for disillusioned dreams, there is the butler Stevens, who spends his life pursuing dignity in professionalism but turns out to find that he might have followed the “wrong” lord, the painter Ono, who devotes his passion and enthusiasm in his “career” to a cause which turns out to be wrong, and the pianist Ryder, who tries so hard to deliver a perfect performance but misses the show. To quote Ishiguro’s own words, these characters may be the ones “who tried to do something good and useful in their lives suddenly find that they have misplaced their efforts” (Shaffer viii). With all these broken relationships and disillusioned dreams, the sad tones seem to be inevitable and lingering.

When it comes to the lingering sad tones, the short story collection *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* is no exception. It consists of five interconnected stories of frustrated musicians or music-lovers, whose lives are full of failures and

disappointments, which can easily provoke sympathies in readers. However, things are not that simple – the way the stories are told are not all melancholy, but sometimes facetious, or even hilarious to some extent: in “Come Rain or Come Shine” there is an English teacher with good taste in jazz music, who tries to comfort a couple of his friends in a quarrel but turns out to be boiling a discarded boot in a saucepan in the couples’ house; in “Nocturnes” there is a trophy of “Jazz Musician of the Year” stuffed in a plump roast turkey by a Hollywood celebrity and a saxophonist both of whose heads are wrapped in bandages shaped like coconuts; and in “Cellists,” there is a self-declared “virtuoso” cellist, who cannot play even one single piece of music by herself. All these plots may sound ridiculous at first, but the stories do not stop with pure laughter, as there is something more than laughter in these absurdities.

Humour can be serious and playful at the same time, and a good humour should be seriously playful. In a broader sense, playfulness and seriousness are not necessarily contradictory. Serious things can be playful, and behind a certain playfulness, there can be serious attitudes as well.

To get a better understanding, we need to take a look at some early theories of humour, which include superiority theories, incongruity theories, release theories and play theories. Alan Roberts in his *A Philosophy of Humour* combs out these early theories and summarizes them into four patterns: early superiority theories are summarized as “[s]ubject S is amused by object O if and only if S experiences sudden feelings of superiority because of O”(31); early incongruity theories are put into a pattern that “[s]ubject S is amused by object O if and only if S perceives an incongruity because of O” (34); early release theories are said to imply that “[s]ubject S is amused by object O if and only if S releases accumulated mental energy because of O”(37); finally, early play theories are summarized as “[s]ubject S is amused by object O if and only if S is in a state of play”(40). After these formularizations, Roberts further categorizes the four groups into two types: cognitive component (incongruity theories) and affective component (superiority theories, release theories and play theories).

Based on Roberts’ summary, this paper tries to analyse the humour in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Nocturnes* from the perspectives of “superiority,” “incongruity,” “play” and “release,” trying to figure out how the five stories in the short-story collection

Nocturnes achieve humorous effects, and what role humour plays on the characters, as well as what functions it may have for the readers.

I “Surprise” and Incongruity Theories

According to Roberts, the early incongruity theories are summarized as “subject S is amused by object O if and only if S perceive an incongruity because of O” (34). He further categorizes incongruity theories as one of the cognitive components of amusement. After discussing both the supporting examples and counter examples of the role “incongruity” plays in humour, he accepts that even though incongruity may not be sufficient for amusement, it is a “necessary” element (49). Incongruity includes as its elements the violation of expectations, the violation of norms, and erroneous conceptualisations. In the five stories of *Nocturnes*, there are many moments of “surprises” which violate expectations or norms and contain erroneous conceptualisations. They may lead to the feelings of “incongruity” and thus create effects of humour.

As for the violation of expectations, in “The Crooner,” there are such violations on both the narrator’s and the readers’ sides. In the story, The narrator, a nameless guitarist in a Venice café, one day spots amongst the customers his idol as well as “[his] mother’s favourite” – a washed-up singing star Tony Gardner. He plucks up his courage and goes to send a greeting to him and that is where the whole story starts.

The narrator has a casual talk with Mr Gardner and his wife Lindy Gardner. Then when Lindy takes her leave to go shopping, Mr Gardner asks the narrator a favour, to accompany him on the guitar when he serenades his wife in a gondola that night. The narrator pleasantly promises to help Mr Gardner and is looking forward to being part of this “wonderful surprise” (15). That night the gondola comes to Mrs Gardner’s window and Mr Gardner calls up Lindy, but Lindy’s reaction after her knowing he is going to sing to her seems not to be “surprised” but kind of nonchalant. She even asks if it is “some sort of joke” (26).

But still, Mr Gardner goes through the songs as he has planned. The first song “By the Time I get to Phoenix” is a song “full of travelling and goodbye” (27). Then the next one “I Fall in Love Too Easily” is a special song for this couple, because they

have some sweet memories about it. Mr Gardner sings it nice, slow and mellow but there is nothing from Mrs Gardner's window. Then they perform "One for My Baby" and at last, they see Mrs Gardner beginning to sob up there inside the room. The narrator thinks that finally "[they get] her by the heart" (28) and he whispers to Mr Gardner, but Mr Gardner does not seem to be pleased.

The narrator also begins thinking that maybe this whole plan has been some kind of malicious joke (28). He wonders whether Mrs Gardner is crying for happiness or sadness, and Mr Gardner finally tells him that after this trip they are separating—they are about to divorce. They still love each other, but they "have to" divorce for the "comeback" of Mr Gardner's singing career, because the media would fancy the kind of news such as a celebrity's divorce.

The surprising serenade is so beautifully and carefully planned that there arises a certain kind of expectation for romance not only in the guitarist, the narrator, but also in us, the readers. However, shortly the "expectation" is violated – the fact is that instead of presenting a serenade for love, what Mr Gardner presents are actually farewell tunes. The violation of the expectations of the narrator and the readers creates a kind of humour, in which a huge tension between "the romance" and "the sadness" is formed. And the tension also makes the readers further ponder over the relationship of the couple, enhancing their complex feelings of their regretful love and their helplessness in life.

As for the violation of norms, as Roberts concludes, it might be difficult to put clear restrictions on the definition of "norms." Norms can range from linguistic norms to social conventions or moral norms. And since it seems implausible to have a clear distinction, the violation of norms seems nothing more than the violation of "normality" (54). It might be a little redundant, but because it still concerns "incongruity," it can also contribute to the creation of humour.

The "surprises" in "Come Rain or Come Shine" and "Nocturnes" may serve as two examples as to the violation of normality, or norms. In "Come Rain or Come Shine" Raymond is invited to his friends Charlie and Emily's home to help resolve the couple's conflicts. However, Raymond accidentally finds a notebook of Emily's. He is not sure whether it is a diary or a memo, but his curiosity leads him to read a

few pages and he finds that in a piece of note about his coming visit, Emily nicknames him as the “Prince of Whiners.” “Such a title” hits Raymond with unexpected force and he screws up the offending page in his hand (57). But soon he regrets it, and attempting to cover what he has done, things gradually spin out of control.

Not knowing what to do, Raymond talks to Charlie about it on the phone. Following Charlie’s advice, Raymond tries to scapegoat Hendrix, the dog of one of the couple’s neighbours, for the ruining of that piece of note. To create the dog’s smell, he boils a pair of old boots in a saucepan in the kitchen. And to make it more real, he crouches down and tries to mess up the room to a situation such as if a dog has been there. At that time, Emily returns and sees everything, which brings the absurdity to a climax.

It may seem to be another ridiculous and absurd scene, but there is again something more than just ridicule and absurdity. It is actually a play-out of Raymond’s inner activities. On the surface, he is irritated by the diary, but deep in his heart, his long-hidden love for Emily and his long-time sacrifice for friendship might have just burst out in a way which is unknown even to himself. And obviously it is a violation of the norm, because no one would do such things when invited to a friend’s house. And again, the humour created by the violation not only brings laughter but also leads people to deep pondering.

Another violation of norm is in “Nocturnes.” The talented but not good-looking saxophonist meets the just-divorced celebrity Lindy Gardner when they are both having plastic surgeries on their faces. And the hotel where they happen to stay holds a ceremony, in which the award “Jazz Musician of the Year” is about to be bestowed. The saxophonist is a little bit “cynical” about his talents not being recognised due to his not-handsome-enough face, and Lindy has been listening to some of his discontents during their casual conversations. Then one night, Lindy gives the saxophonist a crazy “surprise” – she steals the “Jazz Musician of the Year” and presents it to him. The saxophonist is surprised to see the trophy, which, according to him, looks like an alligator. And since he has not lost his sense, he persuades her to put it back to where it belongs. They have an argument about whether the real winner of the trophy deserves this honour or not. It seems that they have not come to an

agreement, but they still decide to return it. Trying to avoid people's attention, Lindy stuffs the trophy into a roast turkey in her haste.

Their behaviour is obviously absurd and incongruous, and the plot also successfully creates a humorous effect. The saxophonist may be "cynical" because of his unrecognized talents and the world's unfairness, but actually there is not so much he can do to extricate himself from his difficult position. So there he is, having plastic surgery in order to be more good-looking, as a popular artist should be. And to put the trophy into the roast turkey is in some way to dissipate a certain "vain glory," or to deconstruct a certain "honour," which has been restraining them all the time.

Then, as to the creation of humorous effects through "erroneous conceptualisation," the surprise in "Cellists" can serve as an example. In "Cellists," the narrator's old co-worker, a cellist named Tibor meets a woman who claims to be the "virtuoso of cellist." Tibor believes the woman's words and lets her instruct him on playing the cello. He listens to her comments and follows her guidance modestly as if he were her student. But it turns out that this "virtuoso" is actually an "imposter" who cannot even perform one single song on the cello by herself. However, she still tries to defend herself:

If you gave me that cello right now and asked me to play, I'd have to say no, I can't do it. Not because the instrument isn't good enough, nothing like that. But if you're now thinking I'm a fake, that I've somehow pretended to be something I'm not, then I want to tell you you're mistaken. Look at everything we've achieved together. Isn't that proof enough I'm no fake anything? Yes, I told you I was a virtuoso. Well, let me explain what I meant by that. What I meant was that I was born with a very special gift, just as you were. You and me, we have something most other cellists will never have, no matter how hard they practise. ... The fact that I've not yet learned to play the cello doesn't really change anything. You have to understand, I *am* a virtuoso. But I'm one who's yet to be *unwrapped*. You too, you're still not entirely unwrapped, and that's what I've been doing these past few weeks. I've been trying to help you shed those layers. (211-12)

Here the woman's conceptualisation of "virtuoso" and "talent" are erroneous and even farfetched. It is actually an excuse for her vanity and sense of inferiority. She might have a deep misunderstanding of her "gift": she is so sure that she has it, but we can see that it might not be true. In this case the actress Lindy Gardner in "Nocturne" might be the opposite extreme of her; she knows that she does not have the "gift," and she knows that she is jealous of those who has it. As she says to the saxophonist,

The trouble with people like you, just because God's given you this special gift, you think that entitles you to everything. That you're better than the rest of us, that you deserve to go to the front of the line every time. You don't see there's a whole lot of other people weren't as lucky as you who work really hard for their place in the world. (166)

Both "the woman" in "Cellist" and Lindy in "Nocturne" have experienced certain disappointments in life. And neither Lindy's nor the "virtuoso" woman's attitude towards art and "gift" is healthily balanced. The erroneous conceptualization of "virtuoso" is more obvious in "Cellist," and the humour created by it again triggers not only laughter but also some deep thinking in readers concerning both talents and arts.

II "Perspective" and Superiority Theories

Roberts formulates the early superiority theories as a pattern that "[s]ubject S is amused by object O if and only if S experiences sudden feelings of superiority because of O" (31). Also according to Roberts' categorization, superiority theories belong to affective components of amusement. After a further discussion of the early and modern superiority theories with examples and counter examples, Roberts concludes that "[a]lthough superiority is neither necessary nor sufficient for amusement, feelings of superiority do play a key role in many cases of amusement" (89). In Ishiguro's short story collection *Nocturnes* and in many of his other works, "perspective" is one of the frequently used words. Some of the "perspectives" might be understood from superiority theories of humour.

In "Come Rain or Come Shine" Raymond is a mutual friend of the couple Charlie and Emily, since their college years. Charlie and Emily seem to be experiencing a

marriage crisis and Raymond is invited to their house to help alleviate the crisis. According to Charlie, the reason why he invites Raymond is partly because Raymond's life is in a worse mess, thus comparatively he himself seems to be doing ok. Charlie says that Emily needs a certain "perspective," from which she may better understand their present life. Hearing this, Raymond replies that "so you decided to invite me for a visit. To be Mr Perspective" (51).

It is a very interesting scene, one at which readers cannot help laughing when reading, and one in which sadness and joy are intertwined. According to Thomas Hobbes, one of the forerunners of superiority theory of humour, laughter can be a result of "perceiving infirmities in others which reinforce our own sense of superiority" (Carroll 46). And according to Charles Gruner, "humour involves aggression because it is directed towards making one person superior, but this aggression is playful because there is no serious harm intended" (qtd in Roberts 86). It is obvious that Charlie tries to seek a sense of superiority through Raymond: he believes that Raymond has been living a more miserable life, and he wants Emily to see it and to realize that he himself is not a failure as a husband or as a man in comparison.

Even though Raymond has every reason to claim Charlie's teasing to be an offense, as a lifelong friend of both Charlie and Emily, though feeling surprised, he still accepts it and he even joins the bantering and calls himself their "Mr Perspective."

Raymond's humour here might belong to a category of "self-deprecatory." Under the surface of humour, a deeper motivation of Raymond's "self-deprecation" might be that he has always loved Emily secretly, and he is willing to sacrifice himself to make his two friends happy. Raymond's untold and unrequited love might be regrettable, but there seems no better way to relieve this sense of loss than reconciling himself to it. And his friendly humorous attitude might be a sign of his reconciliation with himself to some extent.

At the end of the story, after all the ridiculous incidents happen during Raymond's short stay, Emily reiterates that he is such "a good friend" (86). They dance to an old song on the terrace, and as the music lingers, the picture seems to freeze-frame at that sad but beautiful moment. Admittedly, there are some regrets between Raymond and Emily, but Raymond's unconscious humour helps save their

friendship and also to some extent makes up for his unrequited love. Sometimes, to cope with life's insoluble disappointments and regrets, maybe it is worth a try to take a little joke – as quoted from Christopher's words in *When We Were Orphans* – “A fellow's got to be able to take a little joke sometimes”(141).

However, we also need to be alert to the humour created from a sense of superiority. Even though “superiority” plays a key role in the creation of humour, it can still be a dangerous thing. If the aggressiveness crosses the line, it would be seriously offensive. However, in *Nocturnes*, the degree is controlled well.

“Perspective” is a frequently mentioned word in Ishiguro's works, some of which may not directly relate to the creation of humour. In “Nocturne,” Lindy Gardner persuades the saxophonist to start “getting some perspective”: “life's so much bigger than just loving someone” (182). And after that night's farce, the saxophonist starts to think that maybe Lindy is right. Maybe, He “need[s] some perspective, and life really is much bigger than loving a person. Maybe this really is a turning point for [him], and the big league's waiting” (185). Though the “perspective” here does not create an effect of humour directly, it still offers a possibility to cope with life's disappointments. When there is not much we can do, we can at least change our perspective, as quoted from *The Unconsoled*, “It's just a matter of how you look at things” (46).

III “A Free State” and Play Theories

Early play theories of humour are summarized as “subject S is amused by object O if and only if S is in a state of play” (40). With further discussion, Roberts argues that though “play” is not sufficient for amusement, like “superiority,” it also has “a key role in many cases of amusement” (101).

And as to the definition of “play,” the first item of this word in *the Oxford English Dictionary* is “[to] engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.” Thus, it seems that “play” and “serious” are a pair of antonyms. However, they are not necessarily antonymous, not only in humour studies but also in literature studies. Both Roberts and Carrol have argued that “a better definition of play is required” (98). And the idea of “play” has also been discussed by literary theorists. The basement of the deconstruction theories is closely related to the

spirit of “freeplay” – a term raised by Derrida. And according to Derrida, freeplay can also be a kind of “disruption of presence” (925). Freeplay can be a kind of overturn of the existing conventions and discourses, or in other words, it can be a process of decentralization.

Wordplay can be one particular form of playing. According to *the Oxford English Dictionary*, “nocturne” means both “(music) a short composition of a romantic nature, typically for piano” and “(art) a picture of a night scene.” The second meaning originates from the Old French word “nocturne” or ecclesiastical Latin “nocturne,” “neuter” of Latin “nocturne” meaning “of the night.” The title of the story collection as a whole – *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* implies not only a dreamy and pensive texture which is in accordance with nocturnes as piano compositions, but also a close relation to “nightfall.”

However, none of these five stories are directly about nocturnes as a piece of piano composition. Musical elements are tools in this collection, but not the purposes. To get back to the point, because the “nocturne” in the title may not directly relate to piano compositions, we suspect that it might have a closer relationship with the meaning of “nightfall”: in “Crooner,” Mr. Gardner serenades Mrs Gardner at night on a gondola; in “Come Rain or Come Shine,” Raymond and Emily “k[ee]p dancing under the starlit sky” (86); and in “Nocturne,” the saxophonist has his absurd adventure with Lindy Gardner in their “midnight walks” (160).

In the two different connotations of “nocturne” there exists a great tension, which is between the elegance of “the piano” and the absurdity of “the night walk” as well as between the gentleness of the music and the exhaustion of life’s disappointments. A certain humour is born in the powerful emotion wrapped with laughter and tears.

Another freeplay with words might be the characters’ banters. Perhaps the most impressive examples of banter in Ishiguro’s works are those in the *Remains of the Day*. At first, Stevens, the butler who devotes almost his whole life to achieving “professionalism” and “dignity,” finds it quite difficult to banter with his new employer, an American gentleman, Mr Farraday. When Mr Farraday banters with him, Stevens takes it as a very embarrassing and uncomfortable situation, “one which Lord

Darlington would never have placed an employee”(14). However, even though he has no enthusiasm for bantering, as a professional butler, Stevens still sees it as a challenge and tries seriously to learn about it. But it is interesting that the more serious he becomes, the farther away he seems to be from the essence of bantering. But there is a certain humour in his effort itself.

At the end of Stevens’ journey, after knowing that Miss Kenton cannot come back to Darlington Hall, he reconsiders bantering and decides to take it more enthusiastically. He thought to himself that “in bantering lies the key to human warmth” (258). Stevens should be one of those characters who, as Ishiguro puts it, “tries to do something good and useful in their lives suddenly find that they have misplaced their efforts” (Shaffer viii). He used to be very faithful to Lord Darlington, whose judgement of the world turns out to be wrong. And he also sacrifices his personal feelings to a career he takes pride in. But in the remains of his days, looking in retrospect upon his life, it must not be easy for him to accept all the disappointments. However, instead of being immersed in depression, he decides to take bantering, his new challenge in career as well as his new attitude to life, more enthusiastically. It seems that there is a certain optimistic turn at the ending.

Like Stevens, Mr Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* is another example of an enthusiastic person who misdirects his efforts. It must be difficult for him as well to accept the failure as a painter whose artistic talents have been used for political purposes. And Mr Ono also banter, perhaps more initiatively, with people around him. He has been discussing with his students about regathering their artist friends and rebuilding their careers. They have such conversations over and over and finally he says, “who is to say the old district will not return again? We may tend to make a joke about it, but behind our bantering there is a thread of serious optimism” (77). “The old district” could be a metaphor of his career as a painter. And the “returning” of it might be Mr Ono’s suppressed wish. It must be hard for him to express it seriously and directly, but through bantering, he can finally talk about it and maybe try to relieve it.

Banter, as a playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks, has to be kind and humorous at the same time. There is serious playfulness in it. And it can also be

considered as a form of “freeplay,” which deconstructs the past and the centre and offers a new interpretive possibility. Through bantering, characters can to some extent relive their past. It is about sadness and trauma, but it transcends sadness and trauma. To quote one sentence from *The Unconsoled*, “the tone I happened to strike, [is] perfectly poised between seriousness and jocularity” (208). Also banter is an interaction between the characters and the real world. Through banter, the unspeakable can be implied and the repressed can be released. Besides, banter is also an affirmation – not an affirmation of success or failure, but an affirmation of trials and attempts and an affirmation of life per se.

As to the nature of play, when it goes to extremes, it can come to a state of being nearly “out of control.” This out-of-control state might be an apt metaphor for life. And as to the uncontrollable life, in “Malvern Hills,” there is a discussion about it. The narrator, a young guitarist and singer whose career has not been going smoothly at its early stage, decides to “take a break from the city” and spends a summer in his sister’s café in Malvern Hills. During his stay, among the customers a Swiss couple (Tilo and Sonja) catch his attention. The young guitarist encounters the couple again when he takes his guitar outside to continue his composition work. The couple show great interest in his music and they begin to talk. They tell him that they are also “*professional* musicians” – they make their living by performing as a duo in hotels, restaurants, weddings and parties(108). Their life might seem to be a good one, for they have turned their passion into their career. However, their career is much more complicated than pure passion. They cannot always play the kind of music they like during performances, or as Sonja puts it, “in this real world, much of the time, we must play what our audience is most likely to appreciate” (110). Also, because of the career of professional performers, they have to sacrifice much of their time with their son, who seems to be estranged from them now.

The couple’s words are like, if not a warning, a friendly reminder for the young and ambitious guitarist. However, as Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis point out, “blinded by the arrogance of youth, he was unable to see that the disillusionment of the older Swiss couple will become his as well” (3). In one of his interviews, Ishiguro himself also explains about the story “Malvern Hills” that –

In “Malvern Hills,” what I tried to remember was the self-centeredness of being that age, when you’re not sure whether you’re still allowed to indulge in fantasies. Only a few years before the age of that character, when you’re ten or eleven, you are allowed to say you want to be an astronaut, the president of the United States or a detective. When you say this a few years later, you’re accountable. So you’re at that point when you’re no longer sure whether you are allowed to pursue your ambitions or not. What should be your strategy in facing life? And how do you cope with disappointment? When is it appropriate to be angry and frustrated? And when are you just having a tantrum? The story is looking at different models. With the older Swiss couple, I wanted to see two opposing strategies for coping with the usual disappointments of life. Their dreams have not come out quite the way they wanted them to come out. They’ve taken incompatible strategies and cancelled each other out, because they’re together; if both of them were in denial, or if both of them were irate with life, that might work out, but one keeps getting furious and the other is in denial. (Groes 256-57)

Life is full of uncontrollable elements, and when disappointments seem inevitable, in what posture do we live? The Swiss couple do not live an easy life being professional musical performers, but they do not take it bitterly, either. What they keep saying to the young guitarist is that they are “fortunate” and they “enjoy” their work. They play, because they “believe in the music”(108). It must be their optimistic attitudes and good senses of humour that save them from the disillusion of their dreams and ambitions.

Not only tragedies can touch readers’ hearts to the deep corners, but also comedies, as Max Eastman puts it: “we come into the world endowed with an instinctive tendency to laugh and have this feeling in response to pains presented playfully” (qtd. in Roberts 39). And as tragedies can have great power, comedies can have their great tensions too. “Pains presented playfully” has this kind of tension

which can trigger not only the audience's laughter but also their sighs, or even tears. And Ishiguro's humour in *Nocturnes* has this kind of function.

IV "Postlude" and Release Theories

Roberts formulates early release theories as "subject S is amused by object O if and only if S releases accumulated mental energy because of O" (37). And according to Freud, humour occurs in adverse situations that usually elicit negative emotions like anger or sadness (qtd. in Roberts 37).

Have the mental energies been released in the five stories in *Nocturnes*? Maybe the answer can be found at their endings. To use a musical simile to compare with the endings, two choices come at hand: "postlude" and "finale." Since "finale" is "the last part of a piece of music, and entertainment, or a public event, especially when particularly dramatic or exciting," and "postlude" means "a concluding piece of music, an epilogue or afterword" (*OED*), it seems that "postlude" should be a better choice. Because the five stories in *Nocturnes*, as well as many of Ishiguro's works, do not stop at the climax, but stop with a fading-out tune, perhaps we can say that they all have postlude-style endings.

At the ending of "Crooner," the "past" is affirmed: the guitarist (the narrator) says that, "comeback or no comeback, he [would] always be one of the greats" (33), and by saying this, he affirms his idol – Tony Gardener's achievements as a talented singer. Mr Gardner has decided to "come back" regardless of the sacrifice he has to make of his family. But are his "negative emotions" released as well? We may not know it for sure, but one thing for sure is that he must have been ready to move on in his life.

At the ending of "Come Rain or Come Shine," "now" is freeze-framed: Raymond and Emily are dancing as if the picture freeze-framed for the moment: "[b]ut for another few minutes at least, [they] were safe, and [they] kept dancing under the starlit sky" (86). Here at least the messy situation Raymond have created at his friends' house is paused. A certain absurdness and incongruity are released, along with the friends' misunderstandings.

At the ending of “Malvern Hills,” the young guitarist and singer is about to restart for the future: “Then I gazed at the clouds, and at the sweep of land below me, and I made myself think again about my song, and the bridge passage I still hadn’t got right” (123). Even though some disappointments of life seem inevitable, the young guitarist and singer’s stay in “Malvern Hills” is like a break, after which, he will again start off on his journey.

At the ending of “Nocturnes,” the saxophonist changes his point of view: “Maybe, like she says, [he] need some perspective, and life really is much bigger than loving a person. Maybe this really is a turning point for [him], and the big league’s waiting”(185). By saying this, a certain “cynical attitude” is released and at least the saxophonist is trying to see things from a different “perspective.”

At the ending of “Cellists,” the narrator says when he spots Tibor that day it seems that Tibor has “lost that youthful anxiety to please, and those careful manners he had back then. No bad thing in this world, you might say”(221). Tibor is one of the many youths who has been changed by life and growth, whose cynicism and grudges might all be gone with time. Nothing matters so much as it once did, and it should also be a kind of release.

Therefore, the endings of the five stories all have certain effects in which the disappointments of life seem to be released. Humour might not be shown directly in the form of laughter, but since “[t]he laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief” (qtd. in Roberts 36), the relief may also have similar functions with laughter in these stories, both of which can provide sad tones along with optimistic turns.

Conclusion

Based on Roberts’ summary of the theories of humour, this paper has tried to analyse the humour in the five stories of Ishiguro’s *Nocturnes* from the perspectives of “superiority,” “incongruity,” “play” and “release.” Through examining such humour, this paper argues that the humorous style and its effects help the characters release their negative moods, and through reading these works, readers can find not only resonance but also consolation.

Since the five stories of *Nocturnes* are tightly related in characters, settings and plots, and largely consistent in their humorous narrative style, it might also be considered as a “short story cycle”: as for characters, the five stories are all about frustrated musicians or music lovers, and some of which even share same protagonists, such as Lindy Gardner in both “Crooner” and “Nocturne”; as for the settings, the five stories are all set in romantic European towns, such as Venice and Malvern Hills; as for the plots, they all concern marriages in crisis and disillusioned dreams; and as for the style, their humorous narrative style is consistent.

Nocturnes is not the only work in which one can experience this particular Ishiguro-style humour, for we have also experienced it in the “stubborn” butler Stevens, who tries so hard to learn how to banter, and in the painter Ono, who tries to laugh off his past failure. But *Nocturnes* may be the one in which this particular humour style is concentratedly reflected. The humour seems to be casual but there is “serious playfulness in” it.

It might not be appropriate to put Ishiguro into the category of “postmodernists” or “postcolonial writers” in a rough and simple way, as Groes points out, “Ishiguro can be construed as a classic writer with affinities to the humanist tradition, which conflicts with the critical tendency to pigeonhole him as a postmodernist or, even more problematically, a postcolonial writer”(8). Ishiguro himself has also said in some of his interviews about his concern with the universal human nature rather than certain political issues. However, if we have to find some postmodern elements in his works, this “serious playfulness” as a writing style might be a possible answer.

There is a certain optimism in Ishiguro’s humour. Nearly a century ago, D.H. Lawrence wrote in the opening of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* that “Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically”(5). Today, in the Twenty-First Century, many of the excellent writers of our time have also tried to offer optimistic possibilities to the interpretation of our life. In Ishiguro’s Nobel prize speech “My Twentieth Century Evening and Other Small Breakthroughs,” he says that “I’m part of a generation inclined to optimism, and why not?” And as he says, “I am optimistic, why shouldn’t I be?” – maybe so should we.

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