



Crooner: Vignette of Popular Music

Kokhrono Ladu

Research Scholar, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15856462>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 25-06-2025

Published: 10-07-2025

Keywords:

*gypsy, popular music,
commodification, culture
industry, standardisation*

ABSTRACT

Kazuo Ishiguro's short story, "Crooner" entails the story of Tony Gardner through the narrative of Janeck, a gypsy musician from an unnamed communist country residing in Venice. The story begins with Janeck spotting Tony Gardner, the American 'crooner' as he refers to himself, sitting among tourists at the Piazza San Marco. Janeck is reminded of his musical legacy and its impact upon his mother while growing up and soon finds himself on a gondola alongside Tony to impress upon Lindy Gardner as the couple spend one last trip together in the city of love before going their separate ways. The ingenious contrivance of popular music employed by Ishiguro in the story provides a scaffold to study the intricacies of the commodification of music in popular culture. The ever evolving nature of the commodities of music impacts the social and political ramifications of the culture industry. This paper therefore, seeks to explore the lives of the characters through the lens of Adorno's critique of popular music as he maintained that it is characterized by "standardisation" which lacks the potential to wield an emotional competence over the listeners as opposed to classical music.

**Introduction:**

Kazuo Ishiguro Japanese-born British author,. His works have earned him many notable awards like the Nobel Prize in Literature, Booker Prize, Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, Whitbread Prize amongst others. Besides fiction, Ishiguro has written screenplays for films and songs. Two of his novels, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) were adapted into films. His latest collection of song lyrics *The Summer We crossed Europe in the Rain: Lyrics for Stacey Kent* was published in 2024. His books have been translated into over fifty languages. As a songwriter himself, Ishiguro's *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* first published in 2009 is permeated with musical themes and characters as the title suggests. "Crooner" is the first story from the collection narrated by Janeck about an American pop star named Tony Gardner whose fame dwindles down the social ladder thereby, proffering a framework to review the implications of popular music and culture in a consumerist society.

Adorno's critique of Popular Music: Theodor Adorno was an eminent critic of music whose elitist appeal towards classical music in the early 1900s as opposed to popular music gained widespread recognition and criticism from the thinkers of his day. He favoured classical music over more recent music such as Jazz or pop music. In his famous essay, "On Popular Music", Adorno emphasized the repetitive nature of the verse-bridge-chorus structure of songs. He argued that popular music often characterised by 'standardisation' leads the listener to anticipate a 'pre-given' and 'pre-accepted' form of experience. He opined that nothing valuable or novel could be surmised from popular music and that this standardisation of music was a result of the distribution of music in a capitalist society. (Adorno, 1998, p.197-198)

Adorno's idea of the culture industry is fundamentally about the mass production and consumption of commodities including music, film, television, and other forms of entertainment. He claimed that the culture industry functions as a profit oriented corporation that manipulates and controls people by creating standardised commodities to serve the expectations of the people. Unlike "serious music" popular music accedes to "standardisation" that works on repetition and variations of previously consumed music. Serious music is a "concrete totality" because "every detail derives its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece" and if a detail is omitted, "all is lost" (1998, p.198-199).

The concept of standardisation still applies as there are considerable similarities and variations among famous pop songs spanning across decades due to the domination of major record labels in the music industry. For instance, in a 2017 interview, Ed Sheeran proved that he could play every song on



the pop charts at that time with just four chords on the guitar. He enthralled the audience with numbers like “Let her go” by Passenger, “I’m walking away” by Craig David, “Let it be” by The Beatles, “2 Become 1” by Spice Girls, “Locked out of Heaven” by Bruno Mars amongst others proving that the whole industry worked with four chords. (RTL Talkshow, 2017)

Adorno and Horkheimer relates culture industry with entertainment industry as they argue: “Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself. For consumers the use value of art, its essence, is a fetish, and the fetish—the social valuation, which they mistake for the merit of works of art— becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy” (2002, p.128). Adorno's idea of the culture industry and its social and economic implications is one reason why it continues to inform discourses pertaining to ways of life. Popular music loses its value over time as it no longer serves the purpose of providing a means of entertainment to certain groups of people because people tend to move forward for fear of missing out. Although Adorno's perception of the culture industry gathered much criticism, the fundamental insights into the standardisation and commodification of culture that form discussions about media, popular culture, and the broader dynamics of capitalist societies are currently part of a larger debate.

“Crooner” as a Vignette of Popular Music: In the his foreword to Guy Graybill’s *Italy’s Primacy in Musical History*, Frank Tenaglia summarizes Graybill’s book on how Italy gave the world the continuing glory of opera, the grand treasury of Cremona-crafted violins, the art of written music amongst other notable contributions. (Graybill, viii) Best known for its music and burgeoning of the creative arts, Italy is a considered a promising destination for aspiring connoisseurs all around the world. It is no coincidence that Ishiguro chooses Venice, the city of love as the setting of his story to inquire the prospect of love in a materialist society. The city according to Janeck, is still rooted in the richness of its legacy as he notes, “in this place, so obsessed with tradition and the past, everything’s upside down. Anywhere else, being a guitar player would go in a guy’s favour. But here? A guitar! The café managers get uneasy” (Ishiguro, p.3).

The story is narrated by Janeck who talks about his early years and Janeck believes he and his kind are well liked but do not necessarily fit the bill because of the fact that he comes from an unnamed communist country as he says, “my not being Italian, never mind Venetian” (p.4). Ishiguro purposefully describes what would take place on a regular Venetian day at a piazza none other than the Piazza San Marco that is big enough to accommodate three bands playing at the same time. With the influx of



tourists in the city, Janeck says the tourists prefer songs by Julie Andrew or movie theme songs over classical arias or latest pop hits.

Commenting on culture industry in the chapter “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, Adorno claims that culture is infecting everything with “sameness”. (p.94) In the introduction to *American Popular Music* (2007), Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman states that popular music, much like American culture, reflects a “kaleidoscope of contributions, a cross-fertilization of styles, and a blending of dreams” (p.3). It comes as no surprise that popular music shaped and reflected American culture throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The new genre of R & B (rhythm and blues) rooted in southern folk traditions came to the forefront of popular music after WWII mainly shaped by the experiences of returning military personnel and hundreds of thousands of Black Americans who migrated to urban centres like New York, Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles.

The crooner style that emerged from the genre was a blend of blues and pop singing that appealed to a black audience as a by-product of a series of race recordings and also as a result of the ‘Great Migration’ of the Black community who wished to enjoy the “Southern-flavoured African-American music” they grew up listening to. (Starr and Waterman, p.34-35) The influence of African American culture changed the musical landscape of America in the twentieth century. In the manner that popular music appeals to a global audience, its main motive according to Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) as a “species of commodity” which exists in order to be sold yet is not for sale “becomes something hypocritically unsaleable as soon as the business transaction is no longer merely its intention but its sole principle” (p.128).

The rational mode of explaining Tony Gardner’s declining fame is his crooner style of singing that served its purpose until new modes of entertainment flooded the industry as “the public crowds forward for fear of missing something” (p. 131). Tony Gardner reminisces his glory days as a ‘bright, bright star’ around the same time he met Lindy as Dino’s wife. He alleges that people wouldn’t get excited at the thought of him anymore because he believes he is just “some crooner from a bygone era” (p.16). Conversely, Janeck refutes the claim as he believes him to be a classic much like Sinatra or Dean Martin who never go out of fashion unlike those pop stars.

The process of consumption in a consumerist society leads to more demand in production and this becomes an “infanticidal maneuver” altogether. As Adorno explains that when “no attention is given to the song, it cannot be sold; if attention is paid to it, there is always the possibility that people will no



longer accept it, because they know it too well” (1998, p.206). The consumers start craving newer forms of entertainment and production companies have an obligation to meet the demands of the people. Tony consistently reminds Janeck that he wouldn’t know how things worked because he vehemently underscores his doomed legacy: “Fact is, I’m no longer the major name I once was. Protest all you like, but where we come from, there’s no getting round something like that. I’m no longer a major name. Now I could just accept that and fade away. Live on past glories” (p.30).

Tony’s music must have passed through the attention stage for it to be marketable but only for so long as the consumers deemed it worthy of attention. The value of his music coincidentally reduced with time and Tony is fully aware that it wouldn’t be undemanding to make a comeback. Tony realizes that the culture industry is subject to change just as record company executives seek to ensure profits by producing variations of the same kind of music that his music was a part of.

Lois Tyson in his Marxist reading of *The Great Gatsby* echoes Marx and argues that commodification “is the act of relating to persons or things in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value to the exclusion of other considerations” (2006, 69). The character of Lindy Gardner attests this view owing to the fact that Tony married her but eventually concluded that staying in a marriage for as many years is shameful because the ones from his generation supposedly remarried twice or even thrice. This reduces Lindy’s worth to a mere commodity that loses its value over time.

Janeck describes Lindy as “one of those American ladies who are so classy, with great hair, clothes and figure, you don’t realize they’re not so young until you see them up close” (p.8). Lindy’s youth and beauty is certainly an exchange necessary for keeping up Tony’s appearance in the limelight. Whether Lindy loved him as a person at that time didn’t matter to Tony because he believed that they found love as they cared for each other.

Ishiguro also sheds light into the commodification of fame and popularity which led women like Lindy to seek and find potential husbands in the peak of American pop stardom. For Lindy, Tony serves as an escape from the hustles of life under the debilitating impact of capitalism among the working class. Meg who was referred as their “big sister” helped girls like Lindy to find rich husbands at the diner where she worked. The diner was a place where highly ambitious girls came and met to discuss about clothes and shoes that would help them to marry a star. And Lindy learnt everything from the diner that led Tony to claim it as “her Harvard, her Yale” who got lucky. (p.20)



Tony avows that Lindy received her big break after six years of thorough planning and got married to Dino Hartman who sang in Vegas a lot. He decided not to make a move towards Lindy even though he fell for her the moment he saw her out of respect for Dino whom he considered a “decent guy” (p.22). As fate would have it, things did not work out for Dino as the kids started listening to the music of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. Dino’s failing reputation gave Tony the right opportunity to make his move and he became successful in gaining another commodity to his name.

While Tony and Lindy intend to separate in the name of love and professes to part in a civilised manner, Tony informs Janeck that he has an eye on someone saying, “there’s been this particular young lady I’ve had my eye on, and she’s had her eye on me”(p.31). Tony Gardner claims that they are getting a divorce because they still care for each other very much and that Lindy needs to find love and remarry while she still can. Although the assertions made by Tony seem cogent, he sees Lindy only as a commodity he’s willing to replace in the name of love. Furthermore, his fear of becoming a “laughing stock” because of his prolonged marriage with Lindy only evinces his chauvinistic nature. (p.31) The objectification of Lindy reflects a pervasive extension of commodification as Tony’s love for her is bound by physical appearances. The twenty one year marriage that prompts Tony and Lindy to go their separate ways serves as a reminder about the transferability of value and the social valuation for which Tony must strive towards.

CONCLUSION: Ishiguro’s story reaffirms Adorno's analysis of popular music and continue to inform discussions about the relationship between popular music and culture in a consumerist society. While it is preposterous to generalize Adorno’s framework to every genre or sub-genre of popular music as there are several records that defy the norms of standardisation, the inherent possibilities of the culture industry proves a disadvantage for the likes of Tony Gardner whose musical legacy crumbled achingly resultant of its commodification. The wistful manipulation of the people by the culture industry in providing the same kind of music or one with variations of a similar kind deceive the consumers and make them subject to anticipate an predetermined order. The plight of Lindy Gardner illustrates the objectification of women where marriage is treated as a trifling contract that is liable to change. Similarly, the evocation of Tony Gardner’s crestfallen fate reinforces Adorno’s interpretation of the commodification of standardised music that persist in the marketability and value-based discretion of the consumers.



References

- Adorno, T. W. (1998). On popular music. In J. Storey (Ed.), *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader* (pp. 197-209). The University of Georgia Press.
- Graybill, G. (2019). *Italy's Primacy in Musical History*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Ishiguro, K. (2010). Crooner. In *Nocturnes: Five stories of Music and Nightfall* (pp. 3-33). Faber and Faber.
- Lewis, B. (2000). *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Manchester UP.
- M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (E. Jephcott, Trans.; G. S. Noerr, Ed.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1947).
- RTL Talkshow. (2017, February 25). Ed Sheeran improviseert erop los [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/wQKZfvet2mc>
- Starr, L and Waterman, C. (2007). *American Popular Music*. Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Wong, C. F. (2000). *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Northcote House.