

## EXISTENTIAL CONFLICT AND CORPORATE DECEIT: POPULAR CULTURE IN HENNING MANKELL'S *THE MAN WHO SMILED*

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### ABSTRACT

*Popular culture in literature refers to the representation and exploration of the everyday life, beliefs, values, customs, and trends of a particular society or era in works of literature. It often incorporates familiar and relatable elements to a broad audience and reflects the prevailing cultural norms and interests of the time. Popular culture is reflected in literature in several distinctive forms that capture the spirit of modern society dynamics. Its steadfast dedication to tackling contemporary problems, trends, and concerns is one of its essential characteristics. These literary masterpieces capture the zeitgeist in its most unadulterated and raw form, serving as a mirror reflecting the ideas, anxieties, and fascination of the culture that gave rise to them.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Nordic Noir, Popular Culture, Crime Fiction.*

### INTRODUCTION

Popular culture literature's intrinsic accessibility, which appeals to a broad audience, is fundamental to its appeal. Written in a globally relatable language and manner, it closes gaps and creates a close bond between the story and its wide range of readers. These works enable readers to travel on a trip entwined with their experiences and cultural surroundings while embracing a rich tapestry of references to contemporary music, fashion, technology, and colloquial idioms. Intending to achieve a broad audience, these literary works frequently embrace the quest for financial gain. Their work is designed to engage and enthrall a broad audience and revolves around the gravitational pull of mass appeal. Pop culture literature is multifaceted, catalyses social change, and is a source of amusement. It takes on the dual task of promoting discussions and debates on relevant topics while sometimes questioning society's values and upholding established standards.

Popular culture literature thrives on various genres, from the romantic appeal of novels to the mysterious allure of detective stories to the endless possibilities of science fiction and fantasy. They skillfully incorporate elements of modern society, drawing on these touchstones to engross and engross readers in their worlds. These stories have characters that are more than just pen and paper; they represent the values of their time. These people leave a lasting impression on cultural memory, evolving into true icons that personify popular culture and beliefs.

The written word is only one aspect of popular culture's vast influence. It increases its effect and reach by acting as a launchpad for adaptations into various mediums, slickly blending into the worlds of video games, television, and film. Certain works reach astronomical heights within this domain, emerging as acclaimed bestsellers or cultural landmarks that permanently define their time, leaving their imprint on the history of human expression and collective awareness.

Popular culture in literature can vary from one period to another and from one culture to another. What is considered popular culture in literature often reflects the specific cultural, social, and historical context in which it is created. Additionally, what is considered 'popular' or 'mainstream' can change as new trends and influences emerge. Popular culture has been the subject of extensive analysis and critique by numerous scholars and critics. These critics have examined various aspects of popular culture, including its impact on society, its role in shaping cultural identity, and its relationship with power and consumerism.

Several eminent critics and scholars have indelibly shaped the discourse surrounding popular culture, their contributions amplifying the understanding of its multifaceted nature. Stuart Hall, a seminal figure in British cultural theory, is pivotal in cultural studies. His profound exploration delved into the intricate interplay between popular culture, representation, identity, and ideology. Hall's seminal investigations on the encoding and decoding cultural texts and incisive analyses of media and consumer culture are influential cornerstones in studying popular culture.

Frankfurt School scholars Adorno and Horkheimer paved the way for criticism by closely examining popular culture and the expanding cultural sector. In "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," their groundbreaking work, they carefully examined the ubiquitous influence of mass-produced entertainment on society. Their astute analysis revealed how popular culture, particularly when it has been commercialised, can control and homogenise social paradigms, creating a culture that is typified by passivity and uniformity.

Henry Jenkins, a well-known American media expert, has long been interested in the intersection of media, technology, and popular culture. His extensive research focuses on convergence, participative, and fan cultures. Through the channels provided by new media platforms, Jenkins' groundbreaking research clarifies the complex dynamics of consumer participation in and contributions to popular culture.

Prominent British cultural theorist Angela McRobbie has negotiated the complex terrain of young culture and gender in popular discourse. Her sharp questions highlight the mutually beneficial interaction between popular culture and the formation of identity, class, and gender, especially among the younger population. John Fiske is an American media scholar whose studies in semiotics as well as popular texts have significantly advanced our understanding of popular culture. Fiske's groundbreaking strategy challenges traditional ideas of passive consumption by emphasising audiences' creative interpretation along with appropriation of popular culture.

Renowned American writer and feminist academic bell hooks critically analyses how racism, class, and gender intersect in popular culture. Her influential corpus of work examines how popular culture functions as a dynamic arena that simultaneously supports and challenges established oppressive and power structures, igniting vital conversations about social norms and values.

These scholars and critics have contributed to a deeper understanding of how popular culture functions in society, its significance in shaping cultural norms and values, and how it can reflect and challenge dominant ideologies. Their work continues to inform the study of popular culture in various academic disciplines. Popular culture contains a wide range of literary expressions intended to appeal to readers while capturing the spirit of the times in which they are set. This combination of shapes moves across different planes. These numerous forms entice readers into their imagined worlds while simultaneously satisfying a wide range of interests and acting as mirrors reflecting the spirit of their respective eras. The legendary Sherlock Holmes series by Arthur Conan Doyle is a prime example of mystery and detective fiction, which

chronicles the adventures of detectives solving crime-filled, suspenseful mysteries. It captures the mystery and appeal of solving problems, frequently expressing social views on law and order and the attraction of intelligence.

Science Fiction and Fantasy writers like J.K. Rowling and Isaac Asimov create imaginative worlds that take readers to speculative realms where they explore magical realms, futuristic technologies, or parallel realities. These genres frequently reflect technological breakthroughs and societal goals with their imaginative worlds and futuristic concepts. Romance novels are stories about love and romantic relationships that are emotionally charged. Renowned authors like Jane Austen and Nicholas Sparks create engrossing tales of the heart in their romance novels. They mirror society's ideals of love, courting, and companionship and deeply resonate with human relationships.

Horror fiction, which explores paranormal or psychological terror, is meant to make readers uneasy and afraid. Authors such as Stephen King can evoke unpleasant feelings. These stories frequently delve into widespread worries and collective nightmares by examining society's anxieties, fears, and the unknown. Text and visual creativity are combined in comic books and graphic novels to produce compelling narratives. Audiences are captivated by these stories, which include superhero comics from DC and Marvel Comics and graphic novels like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. They are remarkably approachable and captivating because they blend textual and visual storytelling.

Young adult fiction, written for adolescent readers, tackles relationships, identity, and self-discovery issues. Popular series like Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* have drawn hordes of readers. These tales frequently strike a chord with young adults' desires and hardships, reflecting their search for meaning and identity. Literary adaptations give Classic literary works new life in various mediums, such as theatre, television, and film. Shakespeare's plays fill theatres, and classic novels like *Pride and Prejudice* have been adapted for the big screen and television multiple times. These adaptations frequently bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary sensibilities by reinterpreting timeless themes and stories for modern audiences.

The internet and digital literature have given rise to new literary forms, transforming how people share and consume tales in the digital age. These forms include web novels, online fan fiction groups, and digital storytelling platforms. These platforms promote interactive and collaborative reading experiences by providing a range of voices and democratising storytelling.

The Nordic Noir subgenre, which has garnered global recognition for its distinctive features in crime fiction and television drama, has a far-reaching impact on diverse aspects of popular culture outside the conventional literary and televisual domains. This genre is widely present in various types of entertainment, lifestyle choices, and social discourses, demonstrating its domestic and international influence in the Nordic region. The impact of Nordic Noir on digital and internet fiction stands out among these cultural influences.

Nordic Noir has its roots in literature and has featured well-known writers such as Henning Mankell, Stieg Larsson, and Jo Nesbø. A characteristic that distinguishes the genre is its literary settings, set against gritty metropolitan backdrops and complex stories navigated by flawed characters. Globally recognised television shows like "The Killing," "Wallander," and "The Bridge" have attracted a sizable viewership while exploring social themes and providing a complex perspective of the darker undercurrents present in Nordic society.

The influence of Nordic Noir in cinema may be seen in adaptations such as “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo,” based on Stieg Larsson's Millennium series, which has won awards worldwide. Fashion and style in Nordic Noir frequently exhibit understated practicality, effortlessly merging with the overall narrative tone and reflecting the melancholy atmosphere of the genre. The genre's popularity has increased interest in travel to Nordic nations, as fans are eager to see the places highlighted in their cherished books or movies. The visual aesthetics of Nordic Noir, which are typified by ominous, minimalist design elements, have influenced trends in art and design.

By tackling critical socio-political issues, including immigration, corruption, and social injustices, Nordic Noir raises awareness and promotes discussion in popular culture and society discussions. Nordic Noir fans want a closer relationship with the original source material, which is why they are encouraging a resurgence of interest in studying Nordic languages, mainly Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian. The enduring effect of Nordic Noir extends beyond entertainment to include lifestyle decisions and social dialogues, influencing both the Nordic countries and the rest of the world.

Henning Mankell, a Swedish author best known for his Kurt Wallander series, has significantly impacted popular culture through his novels. The Wallander series has become a cultural phenomenon in literature and through its adaptations into television and film. Some aspects of popular culture are associated with Henning Mankell's novels. The success of Mankell's novels is evident in the numerous television adaptations of the Kurt Wallander series. The most notable is the Swedish TV series “Wallander,” widely acclaimed for its faithful representation of Mankell's complex and atmospheric narratives.

Kurt Wallander, Mankell's protagonist, has become an iconic figure in crime fiction. Wallander is a flawed detective dealing with personal demons and navigating a challenging professional life. His character has influenced the portrayal of detectives in subsequent crime novels and TV shows. Mankell's novels often delve into social issues, providing a commentary on contemporary Swedish society. Themes such as immigration, economic disparity, and political corruption are woven into the narratives. This social realism has contributed to a broader understanding of the societal challenges faced by Sweden. Mankell's works are quintessential examples of Scandinavian Noir, characterised by a dark and moody atmosphere, complex characters, and intricate plots. His novels' success has contributed to this subgenre's global popularity, influencing the tone and style of subsequent crime fiction.

Mankell's success, along with that of other Nordic Noir authors, has contributed to the global fascination with Scandinavian crime fiction. Readers and viewers worldwide have been drawn to Mankell's works' unique blend of mystery, atmosphere, and social commentary. Locations featured in Mankell's novels, particularly those in the Wallander series, have become tourist attractions. Fans of the books and TV series often visit Ystad, the town in southern Sweden where Wallander operates, to explore the settings depicted in the stories. Mankell's legacy extends beyond his works, as he has influenced subsequent generations of crime writers in Scandinavia and internationally. His impact on the genre is evident in the continued popularity of Nordic Noir and the proliferation of crime novels with socially relevant themes.

In addition to television adaptations, some of Mankell's works, including the Wallander series, have been adapted into films. These adaptations contribute to the visual representation of Mankell's narratives and further embed his influence in popular culture. *The Man Who Smiled* is a crime novel by Henning Mankell, part of the Kurt Wallander series. In this instalment, Detective Kurt Wallander finds himself disillusioned and contemplating leaving the police force after a difficult

and emotionally draining case. However, he is drawn back into investigative work when a wealthy businessman, Sten Torstensson, asks for Wallander's help in solving his father's suspicious death.

As Wallander delves into the case, he discovers a web of corporate corruption, family secrets, and sinister motives. The investigation leads him from Sweden to Latvia, and Wallander navigates a complex and dangerous world to uncover the truth behind the Torstensson family's troubles. Throughout the novel, Wallander grapples with personal challenges, including his relationships and the toll that police work takes on his mental and emotional well-being. *The Man Who Smiled* is characterised by its atmospheric setting, intricate plot, and portrayal of Wallander as a flawed but determined detective facing professional and personal struggles.

The novel explores themes of justice, morality, and the impact of corporate power on individuals and society. With its gripping narrative and complex characters, *The Man Who Smiled* is a compelling addition to the Nordic Noir genre, showcasing Mankell's skill in blending crime fiction with social commentary. The novel explores several complex themes of the Nordic Noir genre. At the core of this novel lies the pervasive issue of corporate corruption. Through the investigation of a wealthy businessman's father's untimely death, Wallander discovers a network of corruption within the corporate realm. The book delves into the ethical and moral dilemmas arising from unchecked corporate influence and how this affects individuals and society. Mankell masterfully illuminates the unsavoury aspects of corporate culture, highlighting the avarice, manipulation, and lack of ethical responsibility that permeates the business world.

Kurt Wallander is portrayed as a detective who grapples with his identity and sense of purpose. The novel explores Wallander's internal conflict as he questions his role in the police force and contemplates leaving. His journey reflects the challenges individuals face in maintaining a sense of self in the face of professional and personal crises. The novel provides a deep exploration of Wallander's existential struggles. He grapples with the emotional toll of his job, the impact of violence on his psyche, and a sense of disillusionment with the world around him. Throughout the novel, Wallander engages in philosophical reflections on life, morality, and the nature of his work. His introspective moments contribute to the existential depth of the narrative.

*The Man Who Smiled* delves into the grey areas of morality. Wallander is confronted with situations where right and wrong are not always clear-cut, and individuals may compromise their values to pursue personal gain or survival. This theme adds complexity to the characters and emphasises the shades of morality within the story. As the novel progresses, the truth about the corporate corruption is unveiled. The resolution provides insights into the consequences of such corruption and its far-reaching effects on individuals and society. The existential struggle extends to characters making choices in the face of corruption. Wallander's decisions and actions reflect a personal battle with morality and the consequences of choices in a morally ambiguous world.

The novel explores the dynamics within the Torstensson family, revealing hidden secrets and strained relationships. Family becomes a microcosm of the more significant societal issues presented in the narrative. The novel's impact of familial conflicts and loyalties on individual characters is a recurring theme. Wallander's character is often portrayed as isolated and alienated, personally and professionally. His struggles with relationships, the toll of police work on his mental health, and his scepticism about societal structures contribute to a pervasive sense of isolation. This theme reflects the broader societal concerns prevalent in Nordic Noir.

The quest for justice is a recurring theme in the novel. Wallander is driven to uncover the truth and bring those responsible to justice. The novel prompts reflection on the effectiveness and limitations of the legal system in addressing wrongdoing and providing closure for victims.

Wallander's introspective moments and philosophical reflections contribute to an existential theme. The novel contemplates the meaning of life, the impact of one's actions, and the search for purpose in the face of a sometimes indifferent or harsh world. Henning Mankell's contribution to popular culture lies in the success of his individual works and in the broader impact he has had on the crime fiction genre, shaping the way readers and viewers perceive and engage with stories of mystery and intrigue.

The novel *The Man Who Smiled* by Henning Mankell, through the lens of popular culture theories, involves examining how the novel reflects and interacts with broader cultural phenomena. We can consider aspects of cultural studies and the relationship between high and low culture. Cultural studies theories examine how cultural artefacts, like literature, reflect and shape societal values and power structures. In *The Man Who Smiled*, Mankell engages with contemporary Swedish society, addressing issues such as corporate greed, moral ambiguity, and the consequences of unchecked power. The novel can be seen as a commentary on its time's cultural and political landscape.

Mankell's works often blur the lines between high and low culture. While crime fiction is sometimes relegated to the category of popular or genre fiction, Mankell's novels are celebrated for their literary qualities. The critical acclaim and widespread popularity of the Wallander series challenge traditional distinctions between high and low culture, emphasising the complexity and depth of crime fiction.

The novel takes Wallander beyond the borders of Sweden into Latvia, reflecting the theme of globalisation. The interconnectedness of economies and the ease with which crime can transcend national boundaries are explored as Wallander investigates a case with international ramifications. Considering popular culture in the context of globalisation reflects the increasing interconnectedness of cultures. Mankell's portrayal of crime and corruption may resonate with readers beyond Sweden, offering a window into the challenges faced by individuals in a globalised world. The novel's international success contributes to the globalisation of Nordic Noir as a subgenre.

Popular culture theories also consider the adaptation of literary works into other media. In the case of Mankell's novels, the transition to television has widened the reach of the stories. Analysing this adaptation can provide insights into how the narrative is transformed and received in different media, influencing the cultural impact of the original work.

Mankell's characters, especially Kurt Wallander, are cultural icons or archetypes. With his flaws and complexities, Wallander embodies certain qualities that resonate with readers and viewers. Exploring how these characters become symbolic within popular culture sheds light on the societal values and expectations they represent.

Consideration of consumer culture is relevant, especially in detective fiction, where the detective often engages with societal issues. In *The Man Who Smiled*, Wallander's investigations delve into corporate malfeasance, reflecting a concern with the impact of consumer culture on ethical behaviour and social responsibility. The novel examines the consequences of unchecked power within corporations. The manipulation of financial structures and abuse of authority contribute to a sense of darkness and moral decay.

The corporate corruption explored in the novel directly impacts individuals, their lives, and their moral compass. This emphasis on personal consequences adds depth to the exploration of darkness. Mankell uses the crime and its investigation as a mirror to reflect broader societal issues. The corruption within the corporate world serves as a critique of contemporary societal values and the pursuit of wealth at any cost. The novel's themes, characters, and reception offer insights into societal values, power dynamics, and the evolving nature of popular culture, especially within the context of crime fiction and Nordic Noir.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, *The Man Who Smiled* weaves these themes together to create a rich and intricate narrative that serves as a compelling crime story and reflects societal and individual complexities. The exploration of these themes adds depth and resonance to the characters and events in the novel, aligning with the broader characteristics of the Nordic Noir genre.

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