

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

Kazuo Ishiguro`s *The Buried Giant*: Collective Amnesia and the Collapse of Fantasy

Andreea IONESCU

“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galați, Romania

To begin with, it might be relevant to settle on what this paper will take into consideration when using the term *time*. Essentially, it stands to reason that, as far as the analysis of the texts is concerned, *time* will be understood from a narratological perspective, using Gerard Genette’s critical approach. For the purpose of this study, though, time will only be considered in relation to one of the three determinations the French scholar makes, namely “order”. It is the way in which the temporal order of succession is considered against “story time” and “pseudo-time” (Genette 1980: 35) that has always fascinated readers and critics alike in Ishiguro’s prose – that is, the anachronies that fill all his narratives. The most important feature of Ishiguro’s novels is the way in which the narrative toys with the distinction between narrating time and narrated time and all the difficulties that may ensue when these are considered from different standpoints.

Some critics have claimed that Ishiguro’s inclination to temper with the chronology of the events in his novels can be attributed to his Japanese roots and, indeed not coincidentally. As one of the characteristics of his writing style, this manipulation of time is also said to be the reason why his prose is so appealing to the Western public. His narratives are filled with anachronies, prolepses, and analepses, and this feature can easily be attributed to the Japanese tradition of perceiving time:

Structura narativă, plină de analepse și prolepse apare ca modernă europeanului. Viziunea japoneză asupra timpului face însă ca salturile repetate în timp (înainte sau înapoi) să constituie ceva natural. S-ar putea să nu fie doar o coincidență faptul că flashback-ul ca procedeu artistic în cinema a fost impus de un film franco-japonez (*Hiroshima mon amour* Alain Resnais). În Weltanshaung-ul japonez originar, timpul este perceput ca fiind simultan liniar și circular, fără început și fără sfârșit. Un timp liniar de acest tip este, evident, nestructurabil, astfel că orice moment prezintă o importanță egală. Atenția se îndreaptă asupra prezentului, timpul fiind în mod esențial o succesiune de momente prezente.¹ (Florea in Kawabata 2014: 7)

This particular way of viewing time is also reflected in the way the Japanese regard life and death – life is seen as beautiful precisely because our time is so limited on Earth. The level of importance they attribute to the impermanence of life can be seen everywhere in Japanese culture, probably one of the most famous instances being their love for cherry blossoms. The Nippon appreciate the beauty and elegance of the *sakura* because of their impermanence. In a similar manner, the short lives of the clones in *Never Let Me Go*, may be understood as atrocious to the Western reader, but may also be seen as a parallel to the life of the cherry blossoms, since a Japanese-savvy reader would be able to admire the beauty of the evanescent nature of their existence.

¹ The narrative structure filled with analepses and prolepses seems modern to the European eye. The Japanese vision of time enables repeated leaps in time (forwards or backwards) to be considered natural occurrences. It may not be merely coincidental that the flashback as an artistic tool in cinema was introduced by a French-Japanese film (*Hiroshima Mon Amour* Alain Resnais). Within the original Japanese Weltanshaung, time is perceived as simultaneously linear and circular, without an ending or a beginning. Such a linear time is, obviously, unstructurable, so that any given moment is of equal importance. The focus falls on the present, time being essentially a sequence of present moments. (my translation)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

However, Ishiguro proves time and again that he does not use these anachronies as a matter of fact, in the way a Japanese writer may, as it would be the natural manner to refer to time in general. Kazuo Ishiguro (ab)uses the chronological order of the story with the intent of manipulating the reader's perception about the text or about one of the characters. For a Japanese writer, the anachronies in the timeline would only be the 'normal' way to approach time; nonetheless this is not the case with Ishiguro's narratives as he pens down a broken timeline as a means to an end.

Narrating time and narrated time

The first instance discussed here, in which narrated time is juxtaposed to narrating time, is the one in Ishiguro's latest book *The Buried Giant*, which may incidentally also be the most spectacular to readers. Ishiguro has often stated that what he meant to illustrate in this novel was the manner in which "communities and countries remember and forget their own history" (Mathews 2009: 118-19) For this purpose, in TBG, the reader, as well as the characters, can only experience the time of the narrative as narrated time was lost, perhaps as a means to answer a few questions put forth by the writer:

When is it better to forget and just move on? When do we need to look back and be honest and face the past? I've always been interested in that question and I've spent most of my writing life asking that question in novels, but I've also been interested in the parallel question which is how societies, nations do, communities remember and forget? That same question has always fascinated me at the societal level. How *does* a country remember and forget? What are the mechanics, where are the memory banks, who controls them, how do you manipulate them? And, of course, they are manipulated; there's a huge battle over a community's memory because it determines where a community goes next. (Ishiguro 2015)

As such, in TBG, the whole of England is under the influence of Querig's breath which smothers everybody's memories. There are no more recollections as people forget the unforgettable. In fact, memory is often described as a kind of intuition, a nagging feeling that Axl and his wife, Beatrice, get when they come across clues or artefacts from their past. Early in the narrative, Axl, the protagonist, describes how his entire village started searching for a lost child. However, they soon all get distracted by a minor event and forget all about the missing infant; Axl himself only remembers their search just as the child in question comes back on her own:

[...] Axl found coming over him that familiar nagging sense that something was not right, and removing himself from the shouting and jostling, went outside to stare at the darkening sky and the mist rolling over the ground. And after a while, fragments began to piece themselves together in his mind, of the missing Marta, of the danger, of how not long ago everyone had been searching for her. But already these recollections were growing confused, in much the way a dream does in the seconds after waking, and it was only with a supreme act of concentration that Axl held on to the thought of little Marta at all [...] (TBG: 7)

As the girl is reunited with her parents, she points out that she had to find her own way back as she was not expecting anyone to know that she had been missing.

The only things the people in the village remember are the ones that they have a use for constantly; they even have a set of rules that are in place particularly because they forget everything, such as the one that forbids the use of candles by seniors who have even shorter memories. Furthermore, through the limited perspective of a first-person framed narrative, the reader is only allowed to experience the world as the protagonists do, stumbling in the darkness, being driven by instinct rather than

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

knowledge. Until the denouement, one gets only glimpses into the past, clues that need to be put together by the reader and the protagonists alike, while both getting a sense that the narrator, as well as some of the other characters, know more than they let on. Nonetheless, the whole picture remains hidden until the very end, thus truly allowing the readers to experience, at least in part, the protagonists' point of view.

Unreliability of narrators

Closely knit to what has been discussed previously is another trait that all Ishiguro's novels share: the unreliability of his narrators. It is always recommended to regard the Ishigurian narrator with caution as they play a major part in weaving the intricate web of time(s) as it was examined above. As a matter of fact, the inconsistency of time and that of the narrators are so well attached to each other, that it is difficult to pinpoint which is the cause and which the effect. That is to say, it might be unclear whether all the inaccuracies in the time of the novels contaminate the narrators so that they become unreliable themselves, or if it happens the other way around – the first-person narrators, which are by construction meant to be subjective, and therefore unreliable, (ab)use time as an instrument of their own instability.

Inasmuch as all the novels considered have unreliable narrators, they have not been constructed in the same manner even if time plays an important role in their unsteadiness. While the majority of these narrators are defined by their confessional tone and their fickle memory, there are also instances where there is no memory of past events at all, or the identity of the narrator is so broken that it also influences the world around them, at least as far as the way in which the narrator experiences it.

This characteristic of unpredictability of the Ishigurian storyteller is woven together with, or, indeed, is one of the triggers of what H el ene Machinal (2009: 79-90) sees in the case of *When We Were Orphans* as the collapse of genre which leads to reader frustration. She states that the text of the novel and the construction of Christopher Banks, the main character, (mis)leads the reader to the conclusion that they are dealing with a detective novel. Therefore, they will have certain expectations regarding the way in which the main character behaves and the events unfold, or the manner in which the novel ends; these predictions are, nonetheless, not met by the text. The contradictions that surround the protagonist, as well as the opposition between what the reader anticipates and what the novel offers, constitute a source of frustration and an impulse to re-evaluate not only the character of the novel or the text itself, but the whole grounds on which detective fiction is built and, even to reconsider the world itself. By extrapolating Machinal's theory, some of the other novels will be scrutinized in the next section, in an attempt to prove that the case of *When We Were Orphans* is not an isolated one, thus once more attesting to Ishiguro's knowledge and impeccable use of Western literary tools in order to suit his own agenda.

For one, it stands to reason that one may wish to consider from the very beginning that the narrator(s) of *The Buried Giant* are unreliable. Given that TBG is Ishiguro's seventh novel, his avid readers commence the interaction with the novel already having a fairly good idea of what to expect from the narrator(s) or from the plot – be that even to expect the unexpected. This latter approach may indeed prove the most inspired, for this novel has undeniably given rise to a plethora of discussion, the majority of which regards the opposition between the fame of the writer² and the literary genre of *The Buried Giant*, i.e. fantasy, seen as one of the lowest quality forms of literature that is being produced these days. This chasm between low and high culture has had critics and readers fervently debating this work from its debut, and Ishiguro having to either defend or justify his choices in various press appearances time and again. Putting all debate aside, *The Buried Giant* proved to be, nonetheless, yet another bestseller,

² Ishiguro is seen by critics as one of the best contemporaneous writers, a status thoroughly reinforced by the Nobel Prize for literature which he was awarded

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

abundant in Ishigurian tropes, be they to each reader's liking or disliking. Going back to the issue at hand, i.e. the narrator(s) of *The Buried Giant*, things might become somewhat confusing to the reader if one does not pay attention to who the narrator is at all times, because there are indeed two narrators – and both offer a subjective, first-person account.

The framed narrative debuts with the main narrator of the novel, whose limited perspective is cunningly masked by a dexterous play of pronouns within the very first page. The reader is, willingly or not, pulled into the action from the onset as the opening word of the text is *you*: "You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated." (TBG: 10). Nonetheless, having engaged the reader in the action, only a few lines lower, the second person is replaced by the third one: "The people who lived nearby – one wonders what desperation led them to settle in such gloomy spots – might well have feared these creatures [...]". (TBG: 10) In this sudden shift, already, a distance is established between the reader and the characters of the narrative although both are referred to in the third person.

As it is, the separation mentioned above is still felt through a very clever use of the very politically-correct, contemporary, gender-neutral, indefinite, third person singular pronoun – "one". This places the reader in a different era compared to that of the story; a circumstance furthermore confirmed by referring to the characters as "the people of the day", or "people then" (TBG: 10). By the bottom of the page, the distances and positions between reader, narrator and protagonists become clear and the narrator pulls the reader by their side as the first-person plural begins to be used when introducing the main characters as "our couple". Both narrator and reader now become bystanders, who only watch the events unfold before them, but always from afar, from a safe distance; nonetheless, the reader, as opposed to the narrator, faces the same mysteries that surround the protagonists and their environment.

Furthermore, this first-person account may prove tricky or confusing as the narrative voice engages in an external focalization and shifts between Axl and Edwin. As a point of focus, Axl only manages to reinforce the unreliability of the narrative. He has no idea who he is, or what he has done throughout his whole life; he cannot even remember if he has a son or not. And, when he does, finally, figure out his life story, both the reader and Axl are not entirely surprised to discover that the hero is actually a war criminal. As everyone starts regaining their memories during the denouement, it is also revealed that Axl was one of King Arthur's trusted warriors and, as such, he was also an important fighter in the last battle of a war which was deemed Arthur's bloodiest - the very same fight that proved so savage that it prompted Arthur to use Querig as a tool to put an end to war forever.

Nonetheless, while Axl, as one of the protagonists, is not a surprising choice, Edwin, who is only a supporting character, may indeed prove quite an astounding one. Edwin is a child who was bitten by a baby dragon and is therefore of use in finding the she-dragon. Additionally, his point of view is only focalized in two chapters. Indeed, his relevance only takes shape if one considers a juxtaposition to the other focalization of the plot (Axl, i.e. a former knight and a future one), because, by the end of the adventures the characters have together, it is understood that Edwin is to become Master Wistan's apprentice. These two points of focus offer quite a panoramic perspective scrutinizing both what happened and what is to happen.

As for the second narrator, Gawain is the only one who truly manages to steal the narrative voice; this is, possibly, the one truly glorious, epic, moment in the entire plot. Only a hero as impressive as one of Arthur's knights manages to completely overtake the narrative voice, so firmly grasped until that moment by the contemporary story-teller of the frame. Furthermore, despite the fact that Gawain is narrator for only a short length of text, only a few pages long, his interruptions are distinctly placed into

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

chapters of their own, entitled Gawain's First and Second Reveries, as opposed to the rest of the novel, which is structured into four parts and 17 chapters.

The first Reverie appears at the beginning of part 3 and opens with the eerie appearance of some women whom Gawain identifies as widows. Reminiscent of Macbeth's encounters with the witches (Shakespeare 1999: 855), the knight is faced with the wives of men whom he slew in battle; they taunt him, they have appeared in his path to torment him for all the evil that he has brought them. To Gawain's surprise, the widows know of Querig's breath but mistake Gawain's mission; they blame him for robbing them of their memories, as they cannot join their husbands in the afterlife if they do not recall the love they shared. They hold a status that is neither of this plane or the other. Just like Shakespeare's witches, they are neither supernatural, nor human.

Upon Gawain's wondering how these women know of the secret he has been trying to keep so well-hidden, they reply: "We're widows, knight. There's little can be hidden from us now." Only then do I feel Horace give a tremble, and I hear myself ask, "What are you, ladies? Are you living or dead?" To which the women once more break into laughter, a jeering sound to it that makes Horace shift a hoof uneasily." (TBG: 176) Just as in the case of Macbeth, they can be seen as omens, fates, or simply products of his imagination but they are indeed a prolepsis, especially when, as Gawain makes his leave, one of the women throws dirt at the knight's stallion – a gesture which brings to mind the one performed during burial ceremonies.

At the same time, though, this same encounter is also the cause for analepsis as it brings to Gawain's mind the time when he had to fulfil Arthur's request to enslave Querig while the Saxon war was raging on. It is here that Gawain's status as hero shifts in the eyes of the reader as it is understood that he is the one who betrayed Wistan and is actually a foe to the party set out to slay the she-dragon. It is, furthermore, revealed in this memory, by Axl, why there is so much hatred between Britons and Saxons as Gawain finally discloses how he knows the protagonist. Axl himself was sent by Arthur to persuade the Saxons that no child, woman, or elder will be harmed in the passage of the Briton army through the lands, only to have them all slaughtered when the troops arrived. In this, Axl sees no winning victory and questions Arthur's decisions much to the astonishment of Gawain, who remains loyal to Arthur regardless of the missions he is given.

Nevertheless, after his encounter with the widows, and the realization that his mission, as well as his life, are coming to an end, he ponders his past decisions and finds himself grasping for excuses as he contemplates whether he is "a slaughterer of babes". (TBG: 177) In his philosophical state, he questions God, and his fate, indeed even his duty towards Arthur, even if he does not abandon it. He finds solace in trying to atone for his bloody past by starting to admit how wretched his duty has been: "I curse this armour more and more" (TBG: 173)

Finally, the second instance when the narrative voice is hijacked is Gawain's Second Reverie; here, the philosophical state in which Gawain ended the first one is continued. In a sense, it might even be considered as his last thoughts because he begins by reflecting on how Arthur may have wished for him to go about fulfilling his task in approaching Wistan, whom he sees coming from afar. He wonders whether it would be a worthy thing to do to ambush him in a final attempt to further protect Querig, and, therefore, within the bounds of his duty, or to wait for the warrior in the open, even if that means more or less to accept defeat and his death, as he acknowledges that Wistan, being also a lot younger, is a far superior combatant than he is at that moment.

Following this trail of thought, Gawain next remembers Merlin as he waits for Wistan, Axl and Beatrice to arrive. He wonders if Merlin is in hell or in heaven – but while Axl believes him a servant of the devil, Gawain insists that his powers were often spent doing the work of God. He next remembers one

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

of the fallen comrades slain by Querig the day they fulfilled the task Arthur had given them and how this fallen ally wished to be carried to a body of water to drink from it before he passed away. Water is indeed a frequently encountered symbol in the text, seen as a means of transportation not only on land, but also between this world and the next, and here Gawain ponders whether he will also wish some sort of contact with this conductor upon drawing his last breath. His thoughts are soon interrupted by the approaching party and the fragment ends with Gawain accepting to give up his life for his duty.

Beyond the play among the two narrators and the focalization, what might come as striking for the reader is how the heroes of legend present in the narrative – Arthur, England's legendary heroic ruler, Gawain, Axl, even Merlin, although he is but fleetingly mentioned – become antiheroes, thus proving once more how a simple change of perspective can make anyone, at any time, hero and villain simultaneously. While at the start of the novel no one would have dared to think twice whether any of these noble knights and their leader were true heroes, sworn to protect the peace of the land, by the denouement, the lines between heroic and villainous acts is blurred. This, in itself, seems to fit Hélène Machinal's approach to *When We Were Orphans* – i.e. Ishiguro builds up the expectations of the reader towards a certain outcome and unfolding of the plot of the novel, only to deprive them of the fulfilment of all these expectations by not complying with the norm of the genre the novel poses as. In the case of WWO, she proved how the novel mimics the form of a detective story but, in fact, this is only a trope used by Ishiguro, which becomes transparent when the novel is contrasted against masterpieces of the genre.

The collapse of genre

Making use of Hélène Machinal's approach to *When We Were Orphans*, one might venture in arguing that, just as in that case, *The Buried Giant* too fails at keeping to the structural formalities of its literary genre i.e. fantasy books. First and foremost, in such narratives on a basic level there is always a hero who goes on an epic quest to defeat a monumental villain in a grand battle. Of course, the scenery is filled with fantastic creatures, magic, while, usually, the hero gets help from a few friends that he encounters along his way in order for the good to defeat the evil; and, although *The Buried Giant* is filled with legendary heroes, fairies, ogres, dragons, and other such mystical creatures, and it also sets the stage for the epic quest of a hero, by the end of the novel it becomes quite clear that none of the expectations an avid reader of fantasy books might have are being fulfilled.

To begin with, the central element of a fantasy narrative is the hero – a person who has great untapped potential, plenty of qualities and abilities, and who is faced with an extraordinary situation that takes them on an epic quest. At first, the hero or heroine, appear as an enigmatic figure, mysterious, and they may sometimes look like they are weak, but soon enough either through magic, chance, or sheer will power they become mighty and able to complete their quest. Such a pattern is easily identified in *The Buried Giant* as the narrative is indeed centred on an old couple who go on a trip to find their long-forgotten son. On their way, they face many dangers and they get help from new friends. However, the similarities between TBG and a fantasy novel stop at this point. In what follows, all the elements which make up a fantasy narrative, and which are found in TBG, will be taken into consideration with the purpose of proving that they are only present here in order to build up the appearance of a fantasy novel; they are used as a means to an end, as a literary device of manipulation and not as components of the structural skeleton which shape a literary work of the fantasy genre.

The first component under scrutiny is, of course, the hero of the story, which in the case of *The Buried Giant*, appears to be Axl, the protagonist. The beginning of TBG introduces its readers to the main

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

character and Beatrice, who, just like the heroes of fantasy books, look like they are nothing more than an elderly couple. However, the reader does get a feeling that there is more than meets the eye in what these two are concerned and they keep expecting a moment when either of them will transform into a mighty champion that will save the lands from the oppression of the frightful dragoness. The moment, though, never does come regardless of just how dangerous the situation is for them, Axl always choosing to flee rather than to fight, or to simply hide.

Because the protagonist fails the readers' expectations, their attention shifts in search of the great warrior the tale needs, hoping to find them in one of the other characters, throughout the narrative. As such, another character that might look the part may be Sir Gawain. He is a knight of King Arthur and he does have a quest – to guard Querig. Additionally, he does get an epic battle, but he is nonetheless completely overpowered by Wistan and defeated, thus also making him ultimately fail at keeping his duty to Arthur. Furthermore, he is often perceived as a has-been figure, someone everybody derides because he is old, but also because the entire world believes that he has failed in his mission. It is widely thought by the dwellers of the land that Gawain's task as set by Arthur was to slay Querig and not protect her, and, therefore, he is met with slight resentment; he is considered cowardly for delaying for such a long time the confrontation with the dragoness, not to mention that, at the time of the narrative, with all the symptoms of old age, the aches and pains that make him move slowly, and his rusted armour he is not a sight that reminds the onlookers of a mighty hero:

They turned into the clearing, and as they approached the oak, Axl saw that indeed, the knight was no threatening figure. He appeared to be very tall, but beneath his armour Axl supposed him thin, if wiry. His armour was frayed and rusted, though no doubt he had done all he could to preserve it. His tunic, once white, showed repeated mending. The face protruding from the armour was kindly and creased; above it, several long strands of snowy hair fluttered from an otherwise bald head. (TBG: 93)

Subsequently, one might consider that the next obvious choice that would fit the shoes of the tale's champion is Wistan. And he does, indeed, fit the general description – a bold, brave, skilled young warrior from a distant land that appears mysteriously in the path of the protagonists and who is duty bound to slay a dragon. However, Wistan is Saxon, and therefore is perceived as a threat, as the enemy of the protagonists; wherever he goes he is met with scepticism, fear and even contempt. Ultimately, it is he who murders Gawain in order to slay the dragoness, while also using a young boy as bait. All of these are not attributes that an epic hero should have, despite all the traits that Wistan does share with such a character.

Lastly, one might think of a few other characters that appear in the novel, as a last hope to find the missing link that is paramount to a fantasy narrative. One choice may be Edwin who turns out will become a knight and who is one of the two focalisations of the first-person narrative voice; despite this, he is one of the less important secondary characters and, as such, he is not involved in much of the action. Other options, which, however, fail to represent the hero this story so desperately needs can be considered the heroine of Gawain's reverie, and even Arthur. Nonetheless, while one of these characters appears but briefly in the story, the other one is absent entirely; he is only mentioned, a ghostly presence – everyone remembers him but he has already passed away, he is the absent father that the Britons still needed. Above all, none of the characters described above are one of the protagonists – even if they would indeed manage to meet all the required characteristics, they could not, in all actuality, be the hero of the tale if they are not the protagonist, at least not in a fantasy novel.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

Additionally, the same predicament can be encountered in the attempt to identify a proper villain to this story. All legendary heroes have an arch nemesis; but, while it is difficult to establish precisely who the epic hero is in this situation, it becomes an even greater task when one tries to pinpoint the villain of the narrative. The most obvious choice, the imminent threat to the lives of the inhabitants of the land, is Querig, the frightful dragoness that had been for many years terrorising Britain. The fact that nobody has seen her for a long time is no indication that she could not at any moment rise and bring disaster throughout the entire land. This state of uncertainty, only reinforced by the ever-present amnesia spread out across the country, is maintained until the very end, when she is found in order to be slain. At this point, though, the party that set out to kill the dragoness see that she is hardly a threat to anyone:

As for the dragon, it was hardly clear at first she was alive. Her posture – prone, head twisted to one side, limbs outspread – might easily have resulted from her corpse being hurled into the pit from a height. In fact it took a moment to ascertain this was a dragon at all: she was so emaciated she looked more some worm-like reptile accustomed to water that had mistakenly come aground and was in the process of dehydrating. Her skin, which should have appeared oiled and of a colour not unlike bronze, was instead a yellowing white, reminiscent of the underside of certain fish. The remnants of her wings were sagging folds of skin that a careless glance might have taken for dead leaves accumulated to either side of her. The head being turned against the grey pebbles, Axl could see only the one eye, which was hooded in the manner of a turtle's, and which opened and closed lethargically according to some internal rhythm. This movement, and the faintest rise and fall along the creature's backbone, were the only indicators that Querig was still alive. (TBG: 239)

Clearly, faced with this pitiful sight, the characters feel little less than compassion for the creature; killing her seems more like an act of mercy, as if Wistan was actually saving the dragoness from a slow, agonising death, rather than defeating a great foe in order to restore a state of bliss to the lands. Querig's state brings back the necessity of an enemy, and since our protagonists are Britons, it stands to reason that the next obvious choice for an antagonist is the Saxon lord who sends Wistan to slay the dragoness, but, apart from the fact that he is entirely absent from the narrative, it turns out by the ending of the novel that the Saxons actually had good reasons to keep a grudge at the expense of the Britons – it was them who had slaughtered thousands of innocent Saxons under the rule of Arthur. In this light, Arthur seems more of eligible choice for a villain, and so does his faithful knight, Gawain. However, their traditional role as servants of good, as well as the fact that they were both acting in the name of what they believed was the common good, or simply considering their actions were a normal part of warfare, makes them both unlikely candidates for the antagonist part.

Having taken under consideration the two opposing parties of a fantasy novel, it might also be interesting to consider the dynamics between them. With the presence of all these memorable characters along with the shift in perspective, as well as point of focus, the way in which the characters are perceived by both the readers and the other characters of the narrative changes. In fantasy, the lines between good and evil are extremely well determined; however, Ishiguro's narrative portrays knights of questionable morals, a warrior who will stop at nothing to fulfil his duty, an emaciated dragoness, and England's legendary ruler seen as a ruthless tyrant or a merciless leader who decides on his own to enslave entire peoples by robbing them of their memories.

From the start, Axl and Gawain as Arthur's knights have a predetermined status; however, in the narrative it becomes obvious that they are here used as tools to either slaughter innocents or put into action the plan to maintain peace at all costs. Wistan, who seems like a worthy opponent and a respectable warrior, admits that part of the reason why he accepted this assignment from his lord was because he

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

wanted to bring to justice the people responsible for the slaughter of the Saxon civilians. Merlin is brought into discussion by none other than Gawain in his Reverie, as he ponders whether he was a servant of God or of the devil. While Axl strongly believes the latter, Gawain is adamant that the legendary wizard used his powers *mostly* to do good. Lastly, Arthur's position as a righteous and fair king is clearly challenged. The characters portrayed all do their best in any given situation – they accept their fate carry out their duties, even when it seems like they are not doing the best they could. As such, anyone at any time can be both good and evil at the same time, as no one person is entirely good or pure evil. The lines between these opposing sides gets blurred in Ishiguro's tale, a fact which cannot belong in a fantasy.

Finally, although there are some battles and quests described in the text, none actually unfold, or end along the lines that would be expected in the fantasy genre. No battle depicted in the narrative restores peace in a fight between good and evil, and having in mind what was discussed above, it might be futile, because if there is no absolute good versus pure evil, such a battle becomes impossible. Nonetheless, Gawain's sword battle against Wistan could surely be viewed as a suitable choice, due to its grandeur and intensity. However, the result of the fight comes as no surprise to the readers, or to the characters of the book. Gawain himself believes his attempt at stopping Wistan more of a kamikaze mission than a real obstacle to the younger, stronger fighter. Furthermore, what should be the actual confrontation that everyone has been expecting since the beginning, i.e. the moment when Querig is slain, is completely robbed of its significance – for there is nothing momentous about killing a sleeping, emaciated dragon.

As for the pursuit part of the fantasy narratives, while some quests in *The Buried Giant* are indeed displayed, none can qualify as the quest that takes the heroes on a journey to better themselves, to mature and to transform into what was expected of them since the beginning, to save the day and maybe also win over their love interest. If one takes into consideration, firstly, the quest of the two protagonists, the journey they set out on, is never finished; they are seniors, so no one actually expects them to grow and mature, and they are a couple, therefore they have already gained the affections of their love interests. Nonetheless, their journey begins when they decide to leave to find their son whose existence is uncertain to them because of the mist; but, along the way, they lose sight of their intentions and they end up teaming with Wistan on *his* quest to exterminate the dragoness. This latter pursuit, although it is brought to an end, is foreseen to bring war instead of peace as everyone starts to remember their past together with the reasons of their disputes and hatred. Lastly, Gawain's quest, although part of the narrative, is only partly described; the reader eventually finds out what it presupposed, but only its ending is actually recounted; furthermore, it is quite obvious that Gawain in a way fails his quest as Querig is killed by Wistan.

Conclusions

On the whole, as in the case of *When We Were Orphans*, glancing back at what was discussed above, it becomes quite clear how generic expectations are built in *The Buried Giant* with the use of fantasy genre specificities and the Ishigurian unreliable narrator, only not to be met and to lead to reader frustration. Ishiguro himself readily admits to this clever ploy within the text of TBG as he puts it for The Belfast Telegraph: “[...] (the) new novel may feature mythical creatures and knights on horseback, but if you're hoping for big battles like the epic TV series, think again.” (Kate Whiting – ‘People say it's like Game of Thrones, but it's not that kind of story’ in The Belfast Telegraph) Nevertheless, once immersed in a world of fairies and knights, dragons and damsels in distress one cannot help but have these genre specific expectations. And, while it is only a natural reaction to certain stimuli Ishiguro so cleverly controls, so is

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

the fact that, once more, all the frustration that they lead to proves beyond any doubt how unpredictable and unreliable his narrators are, regardless of the genre the text is supposed to belong to, bringing his works closer and closer to the Western literary traditions and further still from the Japanese ones.

References

- [1] F. Florea, preface to Yasunari Kawabata *Maestrul de go*, București. Humanitas, pp. 5-17, 2014
- [2] G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980
- [3] T. Holland, “The Buried Giant review – Kazuo Ishiguro ventures into Tolkien territory” in *The Guardian* – International edition March 4th, 2015 retrieved at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/04/the-buried-giant-review-kazuo-ishiguro-tolkien-britain-mythical-past> on January 13th, 2018
- [4] K. Ishiguro, “The Buried Giant”, London, Faber & Faber, 2015
- [5] K. Ishiguro, interview for Knopf Double Day Publishing House 2015 retrieved at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOVKDLhP_v4 on December 21st, 2015
- [6] M. Kakutani, Review: In ‘The Buried Giant,’ Ishiguro Revisits Memory and Denial in *The New York Times* February 23rd, 2015 retrieved at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/books/review-in-the-buried-giant-ishiguro-revisits-memory-and-denial.html> on January 13th, 2018
- [7] H. Machinal, Kazuo Ishiguro`s When We Were Orphans: Narration and Detection in the Case of Christopher Banks in S. Mathews and S. Groes (eds.), *Kazuo Ishiguro. Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group 79-90, 2009
- [8] W. Shakespeare, Macbeth, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Chatham – Kent: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1999