



LUND UNIVERSITY

Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology

Centre for Languages and Literature English
Studies

“A sickness that could kill a dozen pigs
in a single day”
An ecocritical approach to Kazuo Ishiguro’s
The Buried Giant

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ENGK01
Degree project in English Literature
VT 2020
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Abstract

This essay will analyze Kazuo Ishiguro's fantasy (or anti-fantasy) novel *The Buried Giant* (2016) from an ecocritical approach, with the aspiration to commence an ecocritical dialogue regarding the novel, which, at the time writing this, is non-existent. The first part of the analysis examines the portrayal of nature in *The Buried Giant*. After that, the text proceeds by looking at intertextual stories connected to the novel from an ecocritical perspective. The theories used in this text are gathered from multiple, mostly ecocritical, sources. However, the main source that will be used in this essay, regarding theories, is Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2012).

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Introduction

The Nobel Prize-winning author Kazuo Ishiguro's latest novel *The Buried Giant* (2015) has been subject to numerous studies that have examined a wide variety of aspects ranging from memory, genre, genocide and narrative (See e.g., Lukić (2019); Smirnova (2019); Burow-Flak (2019); Stacy (2019)). However, oddly enough, the novel does not seem to have been analyzed from an ecocritical approach since its release five years ago, even though most of the story takes place in the great outdoors. Hence, this essay aims to provide some of the ecocritical research missing by initiating an ecocritical examination on the novel

The novel takes place in an England recently left by the Romans. The country is to a large extent uncultivated and desolate, with an eerie atmosphere coming off the pages. The novel's England is inhabited mostly by two warring factions: the Britons and the Saxons. However, creatures of myth and nightmare such as dragons, trolls and animal hybrids also occupy the country. The narrative follows different characters but focuses on an elderly couple consisting of a man called Axl and a woman called Beatrice: these two can be said to be the protagonists. Early on the novel introduces its main problem: a mist engulfing the kingdom. The mist negatively affects its victims in numerous ways: those who suffer from the mist forget anything that has happened to them earlier than a couple of days ago. The mist, as it later turns out, comes from a dragon, who the king has put in shackles on top of a hill. With the help of Merlin, King Arthur of the Britons and his closest allies have put a spell upon the dragon to make her release the poisonous mist until the day she dies. All according to King Arthur's plan, the two warring factions have forgotten their discord under the influence of the mist. Should the mist disappear the Saxons would most likely remember how King Arthur ordered the slaughter of thousands of innocent women and children, moments prior to the dragon's imprisonment. Therefore, it is in King Arthur's interest to withhold the mist and the imprisonment of the dragon Querig. Furthermore, without any knowledge of its background or its connection to King Arthur, Axl and Beatrice set out on a quest to remove the mist, hoping that they then will be able to remember where to find their lost son.

In this essay I will first investigate the current state of nature, and the environment, in the novel. Then, in the second part of the investigation, I will focus upon certain characters' actions and what results these actions have had on nature. My argument is that the characters are living in ecological devastation, and that this ecological devastation is the result of their own actions.

The theory this essay relies upon is first and foremost ecocriticism. The field of ecocritical research is divided into several different approaches. From Greg Garrard's influential work *Ecocriticism* (2012) the ecocritical approaches (in the writer's terminology: *tropes*) this text will be using are *pollution*, *apocalypse* and *wilderness*. The trope of pollution will be used to analyze the mist. Further, the results of the mist will be analyzed using the trope of apocalypse. Lastly, the portrayal of nature in the novel will be examined with the trope of wilderness. Further on, another ecocritical approach this text will be using is Lawrence Buell's theory of toxic discourse (2001). Buell's toxic discourse will be used to analyze the mist and, thus, to complement the trope of pollution. Finally, Sherry. B. Ortner's theories of ecofeminism (1972) will be used to approach colonization of nature through the concept of feminine nature and masculine culture.

The second part of the analysis will detain the ecocritical perspective, but also introduce an intertextual point of view. Old poems and legends featuring Sir Gawain, the green knight and Merlin (substantially *Vita Merlini* (ca 1150) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late 14-th century)) will be used to analyze the characters Sir Gawain, the green knight and Merlin featured in *The Buried Giant*. The ecocritical theories in this part of the text are mainly gathered from Alan. S. Montroso's work (2018) where he ecocritically studies *Vita Merlini*. Each approach, trope and theory will be thoroughly explained when they are applied in the text.

How Nature is Depicted

The characters of *The Buried Giant* do not live in balance with nature. Instead, nature is often depicted as a threat to the characters. The novel begins by portraying startling pictures of the scenery: the reader is introduced to "miles of desolate...land" (Ishiguro 3) and the roads are "broken or overgrown" (3). The rivers and marshes are covered in "icy fogs" which serve "all too well the ogres" that are present in the land (3). The narrator continues by stating that the characters' everyday hazards consist of "how to get food out of the hard ground; how not to run out of firewood; how to stop the sickness that could kill a dozen pigs in a single day and produce green rashes on the cheeks of children." (3). These descriptions give the reader the sense that the environment in which the human population lives is hazardous and full of threats. Nature seems to be considered an enemy or an obstacle to overcome and survive. Furthermore, woods, fields and lakes are often described as hiding danger: when Axl and Beatrice, the protagonist couple of the story, start their journey to their lost son's village far away, they begin by crossing the great plains which hide "dark forces" (30). After that, they pass the grave of "a buried giant" where Beatrice informs Axl that they need to be cautious because of some mysterious danger that the terrain is

holding (34-35), even though no visual threat is to be seen. When later making their way across a river, it turns out it is swarming with small fairy-like and mischievous creatures called pixies, who are trying to kill Beatrice by dragging her-down into the water without any provocation (254-267).

The portrayal of nature in *The Buried Giant* can perhaps be said to correspond with Greg Garrard's description of the ecocritical trope *wilderness* (66-92). Garrard begins his description of the trope with a brief explanation of how agricultural settlers historically changed their attitude from seeing their crops as nature's blessing to seeing them as a reward being earned when they won the fight against nature (67). This mindset is present both in the agricultural villagers of Ishiguro's novel and in the overall tone of *The Buried Giant*. The characters of the novel are in the middle of a battle against nature, rather than seeing it as a friend and a blessing.

The *wilderness* trope that corresponds with the characters becomes more understandable when given the fact that these characters live in an ecologically polluted world. The characters' surroundings are engulfed in pollution, which they refer to as a mist. Furthermore, the mist impacts the characters negatively in several ways: first, it pollutes their mental activity, which effects both the short and long-term memory to the worse. Hence, Beatrice wants to remove the mist in order to remember her son. She thinks "it's queer the way the world's forgetting people and things from only yesterday and the day before that" (20) and refers to the mist "like a sickness come over us all" (20). It is of importance that Beatrice here describes the mist as a sickness: sickness is the second way the mist negatively impacts the characters. Furthermore, by calling it a sickness Beatrice begins associating the mist with something more in the likes of pollution and less in the likes of a weather phenomenon. Additionally, the mist is also spoken of as "a kind of plague spreading" (67) and a "strange affliction" (73). These descriptions are hinted to be literal when analyzing the rest of the mist's impacts on the characters. In the start of the novel the reader learns that there is a spreading "sickness that could kill a dozen pigs in a single day and produce green rashes on the cheeks of children" (3). Later in the novel, the reader learns that Beatrice is sick as well, with an undefined illness that seems to be an internal wound. Beatrice sickness could possibly be the same sickness that was referenced in the beginning of the novel: hence, the mist could possibly be the guilty party here. Beatrice's illness first takes her strength away from her, rendering her unable to walk, (311) and then it takes her life as well (345-362). The name of the illness is not shared, but from its descriptions it could possibly be a pollution induced type of cancer.

Furthermore, the third way the mist negatively impacts the characters relates to the sense that it seems to have something to do with people suddenly disappearing. The novel starts off by stating that ever so often a child is carried off to the mist (4), which, in absence of another

subject, could possibly suggest that the mist somehow executes the kidnappings itself. Another instance of these disappearances is recalled by Axl, when he one morning remembers a female villager who disappeared out of the blue: “the woman was no dream. . . There she was at our door only a month ago” (8), but “then we never saw her again” (9). Furthermore, these disappearances, related to the mist, could be seen as a metaphor for death.

This could be suggested in the case of Axl’s and Beatrice’s son, who disappeared several years ago. The fact that their son is dead is hinted all throughout the story:

‘What became of our son, princess?’ he asked suddenly, and felt her hand tighten on his. ‘Does he really wait for us in his village? Or will we search this country for a year and still not find him?’. (322-323)

They both, however, realize their son is dead and buried in the end when Axl remembers that he forbade Beatrice “to go to his grave” (356). In summary, the truth of their son’s disappearance could possibly be sickness caused by the pollution: as in the latter case of Beatrice.

The mist can be better understood when comparing the pollution in *The Buried Giant* to the pollution in Carson’s influential and ecocritical work *Silent Spring* (1962). Ecocritical studies on *The Buried Giant* are, as has been said, none, but comparing the novel by using the words of Ralph Lutts (1985), as he addresses the pollution in *Silent Spring*, shows that the two works have a lot of common ground:

[Carson] was sounding an alarm about a kind of pollution that was invisible to the senses; could be transported great distances, perhaps globally; could accumulate over time in body tissues; could produce chronic, as well as acute, poisoning; and could result in cancer, birth defects, and genetic mutations that may not become evident until years or decades after exposure. Government officials, [Carson] also argued, were not taking the steps necessary to control this pollution and protect the public. (19)

There are several connections between Carson’s description of pollution in *Silent Spring* and the pollution Ishiguro depicts in *The Buried Giant*. In the latter work, just as in *Silent Spring*, the pollution is also being spread invisibly as far as the characters know (perchance globally). Secondly, the pollution also results in illnesses: in Beatrice’s case cancer. Genetic mutations can possibly be found in *The Buried Giant* as well. The novel is full of animal hybrids that could

likely be suffering from genetic mutation. Finally, the men in power do not wish to take a single step necessary to control the pollution and protect the public. Instead, they are the ones who initiated the pollution and the ones who keep it going.

However, the similitudes between the two texts stretch further than just pollution. Carson's text presents a pastoral landscape where man and animal live side by side, but then pollution and poison come and disturb the balance:

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. In the town the doctors had become more and more puzzled by new kinds of sickness appearing among their patients. There had been several sudden and unexplained deaths, not only among adults but even among children, who would be stricken suddenly while at play and die within a few hours. (1)

Carson's pollution comes from pesticides, while the pollution in *The Buried Giant* originates from the spellbound dragon Querig. Although there are differences regarding where or what the pollution stems from, the symptoms are the same. Carson's pollution ends the lives of animals, just like Ishiguro's pollution "could kill a dozen pigs in a single day" (3). Furthermore, Carson describes the pollution as "some evil spell", which responds well to the pollution in *The Buried Giant*: in Ishiguro's novel the pollution is made possible by an evil spell. What Carson describes as "sudden and unexplained deaths" is another possible parallel to *The Buried Giant* where people seem to disappear out of the blue and later turning up dead. Lastly, the doctors in *The Buried Giant* seem just as puzzled as the doctors Carson describes above: many tried, but none could help Beatrice in her illness and the ailment is left undefined or named throughout the novel.

Garrard argues that Carson's *Silent Spring*, with its toxic world, is a great example to his ecocritical trope *apocalypse* (102-103). The similarities between *Silent Spring* and *The Buried Giant*, focusing on this trope, are striking as well. The worlds of these two separate texts both involve a scenery where man and nature have lost balance when one day pollution brings everything upside down. In both novels the pollution is man-made and in both novels nature surrenders. Further, the human populations in both novels tries to transcend nature and finally conquers, but at same time loses in casualties and disordered ecosystems. According to Greg

Garrard's review of *Silent Spring*, and the similarities to *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro's novel could then be considered an eco-apocalyptic novel as well.

In *The Buried Giants* eco-apocalyptic world it is not just the human population who falls victim to the pollution: the animal kingdom suffers both casualties and disturbances as well. Just as pesticides like DDT pollute the animal kingdom in *Silent Spring* - where the birdsong stops altogether – the pollution of Ishiguro's novel seems to do the same. Some animals in *The Buried Giant* have changed their behavioral patterns, which indicates a stressed ecosystem. At the beginning of the *Buried Giant*, for instance, one can read that the population of “wolves had vanished altogether” (11). Instead of wolves, new animals like wren-eagles turn up, and “the appearance of a wren-eagle in their country was news indeed” (11). These changes are possible symptoms of a confused ecosystem and can be compared to the changes found in Richard B. Primack's *Walden Warming* (2015). In *Walden Warming* Primack studies the environment around Concord and notes how it has altered compared to when Henry David Thoreau studied it in his eco-influential book *Walden* (1854) almost 170 years ago. One of the changes that Primack finds is that the population of wolves has disappeared altogether (60-61, 74). Another finding Primack made around concord is that the wren-eagle seems to have changed its behavioral pattern as well (126). Primack states that these changes are because of climate change (ix), and since the same changes can be seen in *The Buried Giant*, the pollution could possibly be the guilty party here as well. Furthermore, the confusion of the ecosystem and animal kingdom could then be a sign of climate crisis, and in extension a sign of an eco-apocalypse possibly brought forward by the pollution.

However, the mist in Ishiguro's novel has more visible impacts on the animal kingdom than just new behavioral patterns. The presence of animal hybrids, for example, directs the thought to the disaster at Chernobyl and the mutations the tragedy resulted in. Some of these Chernobyl mutations include barn swallows with various deformities, as has been shown in a study by Møller et al. These barn swallows seem to have similar mutations as the hybrids of *The Buried Giant*, which is interesting since both mutations were the result of pollution. In Ishiguro's novel one of these animal hybrids is described as the protagonists venture through an underground tunnel:

They might have been gazing at a large skinned animal: an opaque membrane, like the lining of a sheep's stomach, was stretched tightly over the sinews and joints. . . the beast appeared roughly the size and shape of a bull, but its head was distinctly wolf-like and of a darker hue . . . The jaws were massive, the eyes reptilian. (200)

The character who gives the description of this deformed animal is Sir Gawain. Sir Gawain is an old knight supposedly chosen by King Arthur to protect Querig and withhold the pollution. While viewing the animal hybrid, Sir Gawain recalls another instance with a similar creature and tells Axl that “on the marshes at Dumum, [he] faced wolves with the heads of hideous hags!” (200). Both of these hybrids could possibly be creations of the pollution.

The pollution, however, also fits well into what Lawrence Buell’s theory of toxic discourse (37-43). A toxic discourse is a discourse containing an “anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency”, Buell sums up (30-31). For a work to be considered having a toxic discourse the author has set up four different criteria. The criteria are that the work must contain “a mythography of betrayed Edens”, “totalizing images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration”, a threat of hegemonic oppression and “gothicization” of the environment (30-31). The first criterion relates to a depiction of nature that at first holds a balance and tranquility between all living beings, but later has its peace and stability shattered. The second criterion is fulfilled when a story involves thorough pictures of a kind of unavoidable pollution that leaves no mercy. The third criterion refers to a kind of rulership that leans towards (or downright is) dictatorship. The last criterion includes a darkened discourse and description of the environment. The first criterion is visible in the novel in the way the natural balance has changed as a result of pollution: ecosystems in confusion, animal deformities and more. The second criterion can be found in how the pollution spreads out all over the kingdom and possibly further, and the fact that the characters to begin with have no idea where it is coming from or how to stop it. The third criterion is present in the fact that the ones responsible for the pollution are King Arthur and his closest allies. The last criterion - which has been discussed earlier – relates to how the atmosphere and environment often are said to contain a darkness. Matching all four criteria, *The Buried Giant* can be said to be communicating a toxic discourse.

Further, this toxic discourse that can be found in *The Buried Giant* is heard from voices of several different beliefs. Greg Gerrard reminds his reader that pollution of nature has historically been causing considerable fear for the end of the world in “both religious and secular” people (103). In *The Buried Giant* people with various beliefs try to make sense of the pollution, but also do something to stop it. A village chieftain, for instance, introduces Beatrice to the thought that the pollution is sent from the lord above. This theory resonates with Beatrice and she questions if “perhaps God is angry about something [they] have done? Or maybe he’s not angry, but ashamed” (86). The “something” that has been done can in this case only be man’s

conquering of nature. So, if the pollution should be a sign of God's anger or shame, then perhaps the reason for the anger and shame is because of how God's creations have treated each other.

However, the loudest religious voice concerning the pollution comes from a collective of monks who reside for themselves in an old monastery. Just like Beatrice, the monks interpret the pollution and the confusion of the ecosystem as a sign of a judgment from above. They find reason for suspicion in the latest birds that have started flocking the monastery. Birds in themselves are nothing new to the monks: the winged creatures have shared the monastery with the monks for ages, however, the new generations of birds are recognized by the monks as transformed and full of rage:

They never came before. Even last winter, though the wind made the strongest of us weep, the birds were but mischievous children. . . But now a new breed comes to find us, larger, bolder and with fury in their eyes. (173-174)

In these birds the monks see an indication of a rage from the divine. They believe that "these dark crows and ravens are a sign of God's anger" (173). They suppose the birds are there to communicate God's dissatisfaction. Some of the monks, however, are certain that the birds instead are spawns of Satan: "the newcomer was carrying a straw bag, and he now reached into it, brought out a stone and hurled it up at the birds. 'Demons! Foul demons, demons, demons!'" (148). The behavioral change in the species causes fear in the monk, he continues: "Don't you stop me, father! They're agents of the devil!" (148). However, the more rational of the monks recognize the birds to be the opposite of spawns of Satan. Hence, the terrified monk is put down when he is told that "they may yet be agents of God" (148).

Most of the monks seem to think that the presumed anger of God comes from human treatment of nature. Therefore, they try to repent God's anger by letting nature take revenge. In the way of Prometheus, who also suffered from a godly anger, they lock themselves up in cages on the top of a mountain to let the ravenous birds pick their flesh for food. A visitor describes the monks' practice to his companion:

the custom here has been for the monks to take turns in that cage exposing their bodies to the wild birds, hoping this way to atone for crimes once committed in this country and long unpunished. (173)

The “crimes committed” could potentially refer to unjust human colonizing of nature. Acting on the knowledge that nature has been unfairly exploited, and in line with their atonement of the crimes committed, they have now become a kind of protectors of nature: “It’s the dragon Querig...She’s the cause of the mist you speak of. Yet these monks here protect her, and have done so for years.” (176). Contrary to King Arthur, Sir Gawain and the rest that withhold the pollution, the monks instead seem to protect Querig because of her connection to nature and possibly their fear for further anger from God.

In connection to the monks’ sense that nature needs to be atoned, the monks seem to have become both mentally and physically closer to nature. This is first recognizable, as has been discussed, in their change of sympathies which makes them endure birds to feast upon them and which makes them protect animals like Querig. But the change is also recognizable in their personal traits. One of the wisest monks at the monastery is named Jonah, which is an old Hebrew name meaning *dove* (McKenzie 113). Furthermore, some of the monks have even started to develop features that make them resemble birds. One monk, for instance, “was thin, almost emaciated, and his protruding eyes started at them without expression” (Ishiguro 167). Suggestively, the monks have perhaps understood that they are creatures of nature as well. In any case, in line with the monks’ growing sympathies towards nature they become more and more recognizable as a part of it.

Intertextual Myths and Legends

Using elements and characters from myth and fantasy, *The Buried Giant* presents a natural world that has become conquered by force as well as magic. By the middle of the novel, it is revealed that the great She-dragon Querig is responsible for the pollution that is spread out all over the kingdom. King Arthur has ordered her imprisonment on top of a hill – hidden away in a forest – and by the help of a magical spell cast upon her by the mythological wizard Merlin she is forced to spew out this pollution until she dies. King Arthur executed the order since the pollution will make his enemy faction the Saxons forget that he earlier ordered the slaughter of villages full of innocent Saxon women and children, hence breaking the treaty made between the two factions. Therefore, in the shadows of his crimes he is magically forcing peace and alliance by making the Saxons forget his betrayal.

Natural creatures and innocent women and children had to pave way for the forced-upon peace. Therefore, one of the main characters, Axl, criticizes the action in a discussion with King

Arthur's firsthand man. King Arthur did not create peace, he created a collective forgetfulness after he broke the official peace treaty, Axl seems to say: "the law was well held on both sides until that day, Sir Gawain,'. It was an unholy thing to break." (313). Axl considers King Arthur's slaughter of innocent women and children an unholy and gruesome operation. Gawain, however, cannot see past the current situation and argues that "the wars stopped at last" (313). He continues: "wasn't that so, sir? Hasn't peace been our companion since that day?" (313). Gawain considers the massacre a necessary sacrifice for restoring peace. What Gawain does not seem to understand is that the slaughter was not necessary at all. The only reason peace came to the kingdom was because King Arthur and Merlin had the dragon Querig spellbound to force the Saxons to forget about their murdered family members. Since the Saxons cannot remember that the Britons, under the influence of King Arthur, have murdered their family members, they have no reason to engage in warfare, and, so, a forced peace has flourished. Hiding murders by forcing those effected into forgetfulness cannot be the same thing as peace.

After the newly compelled peace and alliance, the Britons want cultural growth. They want territorial expansion and they certainly do not want the Saxons to avenge their fallen family members. Thus, women, children and nature must take the blow for the strongest men to do what they want to do. Cultural growth and progression will flourish once it is unhindered by attacking foes. Sherry B. Ortner, in her ecofeminist article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?", states that "culture (i.e., every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from, but superior in power to, nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform—to 'socialize' and 'culturalize'—nature" (11). This could be said to be the case in *The Buried Giant*. The fact that the dragon who becomes culturalized and socialized is a female dragon, unnecessarily referred to by her femininity (the She-dragon) makes a fitting example for Ortner's theory. A second example is that the people who must suffer for the culturalization and socialization are female as well as children, and not men: women and children were the ones who became executed in order to kickstart cultural growth over nature. Finding evidence in sources like Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, where the female body and its biological functions are argued to be more in connection with nature than that of the body of a man, Ortner argues that women are more connected to nature, while men are more connected to culture (12). She continues by stating that "since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if woman is a part of nature, then culture would find it 'natural' to subordinate, not to say oppress, her" (12). In order to transcend nature and let culture flourish King Arthur had nature oppressed and colonized, in the shape of Querig.

Secondly, women had to follow suit and became oppressed and even massacred as well. In accordance with these actions, King Arthur seems to correspond to Ortner's theory stated above.

However, King Arthur has not been alone in his actions: to colonize Querig and transcend nature King Arthur has had good use of his right-hand man, Merlin. Alan S. Montroso's article "From Fantasies of Wilderness to Ecological Sovereignty: An Ecocritical Reading of the *Vita Merlini*", shows how Merlin, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's poem *Vita Merlini* from around 1150, proceeds from living in balance with nature to ultimately conquer it completely. In *Vita Merlini* Merlin starts off as a wild man living in the woods side by side with the other creatures there, to later become a colonizer of the same woods, Montroso argues (38-53). In *The Buried Giant* Merlin is not present in character: he is in fact already dead, but from the tales of the other characters the reader finds out that the shackling of Querig actually was made possible first and foremost because of Merlin's sorcery. In Montroso's reading of *Vita Merlini* the author argues that only after feminizing the natural environment and giving it a name, the colonization starts. In Ishiguro's novel, Merlin starts his colonization by conquering and enslaving the strongest and fiercest animal of the natural world. However, the animal is not only given a name: it is also given the title of "she-dragon" instead of just "dragon": which is interesting in relation to Ortner's theory that nature is female. Furthermore, Marlene Longenecker sums up this tendency in her essay "Women, Ecology, and the Environment: An Introduction" (1997):

...in transcultural, global patriarchal practices, "women" and "nature" share a subordinate and instrumental relationship to men; both are subject to patterns, attitudes, and institutions of male domination and control; both are gendered "feminine" as one of the means of that control. (2)

Following Longenecker's theory, King Arthur and his men might have given Querig the title *she-dragon* in order to establish further control and domination over her. With the new name King Arthur might have justified his way towards oppression, colonization, and, in extension, transcendence of nature for cultural and masculine progression. Another character who has done the exact same thing is Merlin.

In *The Buried Giant* Merlin has reached complete hegemonic eco-colonization that he longed for in *Vita Merlini*. In Monmouth's text, Montroso recognizes several techniques that Merlin uses to achieve domination over the same woods he earlier lived in, most of which have been discussed earlier. After Merlin has initiated his colonization, with actions Montroso recognizes as feminizing and naming, he proceeds to settle down in the woods. He first builds a

cabin for himself and then expands to a larger settlement. When finished, Merlin has reached what Montroso considers an almost complete hegemonic conquering of the woods, but Merlin does not settle there: instead, he looks for a way to control the weather. Montroso writes:

Merlin next receives his friend Taliesin, a learned prophet whom he hopes can explain the persistence of stormy weather. Since complete sovereignty over the forest cannot be actualized—climactic events and other agencies always escape the human sovereign—Merlin presumes knowledge will translate to power over Nature. (49)

Montroso argues that the last thing standing in the way of complete human sovereignty over nature is for Merlin to learn how to control the climate (49). In *The Buried Giant* Merlin has seized this last siege of total control over nature: he has learned how to control the climate by the help of Querig's pollution.

Furthermore, an intertextual, chronological link between *Vita Merlini* and *The Buried Giant* seems to be suggested. The same woods Merlin set out to colonize in *Vita Merlini* seem to reappear in *The Buried Giant*. As Sir Gawain stumbles through some greenery, he realizes that "these may well be Merlin's woods, and made for this very purpose: that I may some day shelter here" (Ishiguro 297). First off, by referring to the woods in the likes of an object that is in Merlin's possession indicates and further enhances the colonization of the woods. Secondly, that Sir Gawain is saying that the woods are made for him to shelter in reveals his own anthropocentric view, but more importantly the quote suggests that he is talking about the woods that first appeared in *Vita Merlini*: the Calidon forest. The woods first became Merlin's woods in *Vita Merlini*, since it was in this work's time lapse Merlin colonized the woods. Furthermore, earlier this text discussed, in relation to *Vita Merlini*, Merlin's settlement in the woods. Since a settlement in *The Buried Giant* has not been mentioned in the novel, until now, it seems to be suggested that what has been "made for this very purpose: that [Gawain] may some day shelter here" (297) is in fact the settlement Merlin established in *Vita Merlini*. Montroso describes who this settlement took place in *Vita Merlini*:

As winter arrives, Merlin accedes to his sister's request that he take shelter against the snow and builds a cluster of cabins in the woods. In effect, Merlin demands that his favored trees be transformed into lumber and that a stretch of his beloved Calidon Forest be transformed into a clearing for a small community of human homes. A shelter

against the storms allows Merlin an illusion of mastery over the forces he cannot control. (47)

However, the settlement Merlin established in the woods, in *Vita Merlini*, that Gawain states has been made for him to shelter in, are not the only connection between the two novels in relation to the woods. In Montroso's quote above it is specified that the settlement was established in order to take shelter from the storm. Furthermore, as Gawain enters the woods in *The Buried Giant* he seems to be complaining about a storm as well: "This cursed wind. Is this a storm before us?" (Ishiguro 295). Additionally, Gawain continues to rant about the wind throughout the visit (295-303). Interestingly, this wind is also the reason for Gawain needing a shelter in the first place, just like Merlin in *Vita Merlini*. This link between the stories in relation to the woods seems to show how the natural environment has suffered from Merlin's colonization of the woods that started off in *Vita Merlini* and received its finale in *The Buried Giant*.

The further Gawain ventures into the woods the more obvious the natural decline and devastation become. Following Merlin's eco-colonizing footprints Gawain first feels puzzled about some trees. He says that "they grow so strange one wonders if Merlin himself cast a spell here" (296). As Gawain is closing in on Querig's lair more unusual trees reveals themselves. He finds a pond where "around its rim, three great trees, yet each one cracked at the waist and fallen forward into the water" (297) and he is certain that "surely they stood proudly" (297) when he was last there. Gawain is witnessing how nature is acting unusual. The same cracked trees are now housing mountain birds who nest in the trees' "broken spines" (298). However, the climax of the natural declination in the wake of Merlin and the pollution reveals itself as Gawain reaches Querig's pit. Nature all around him seem to have died and he finds no living thing whatsoever. The exception is one "solitary bush", shining with the absence of all other green life. Hence, the pollution has killed all life in the nearest area. The same pollution which is suggested to be Merlin's work.

Merlin starts his colonization of the woods in *Vita Merlini*. However, it soon becomes apparent to him in *Vita Merlini* that a roof over his head is not the same thing as controlling the climate. Merlin wants to control the climate in *Vita Merlini*, but he does not have the sufficient intelligence. In *The Buried Giant* Merlin accomplishes his quest of controlling the climate and thus becomes an absolute colonizer of the woods. Hence, the death of all living things that Gawain is witnessing around Querig's lair is a result of Merlin's colonization. However, there are more aspects of Merlin and his actions to consider.

When Christine Chism reads *Vita Merlini* and compares it to its precursor *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (ca 1136) in *Ain't Gonna Study War No More* she notices that Merlin does not want to promote “masculine rivalries” (460) in contrast to Merlin in Monmouth’s *Historia*. Instead, Chism argues that Merlin, in his endeavors to gain knowledge of the natural world, is attempting to restore reciprocal human alliances. This suggests another similarity between Merlin of the poem(s) and Merlin in *The Buried Giant*. It was for peace and not as a tool for warfare that Querig became imprisoned and the victim of colonization. However shady it might have been, King Arthur and Merlin’s reason for spellbinding Querig was that they wanted a kind of peace. Querig’s warden, Gawain, continues to make this apparent. As a warrior approaches Querig, Gawain tells him to “leave this place, and let Querig do her work a while longer” (Ishiguro 327): for at least “another season or two... even that may be long enough for old wounds to heal for ever, and an eternal peace to hold among us” (327). The hegemonic knowledge about the natural world that Merlin longed for in *Vita Merlini* was meant to be used as an instrument for human alliances and peace. In *The Buried Giant* Merlin has mastered and put to use the knowledge that Merlin of Monmouth’s works was searching for. The natural is conquered, the climate is mastered and peace is flourishing. Gawain puts Merlin’s ideology to words when he asks Axl whether “without [the] she-dragon’s breath, would peace ever have come? Look how we live now, sir! Old foes as cousins, village by village” (326).

In *The Buried Giant* one can find a second intertextual and chronological link to a poem called *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, supposedly written in the late 14-th century by an unknown author commonly referenced as the Gawain poet. In the poem the green knight is first revealed as he rides into King Arthur’s banquet and dares Sir Gawain to cut off his head. The event is supposed to be interpreted as a game, and should Sir Gawain accept the dare the green knight in return gets to cut off Gawain’s head in exactly a year and a day’s time. After Gawain separates the green knight’s head from his neck the Green Knight simply picks his head up again and puts it back on its place. When David Williams analyzes the green knight from the poem, he first focuses on the fact that the knight is portrayed entirely in green and argues that this color has often been understood to symbolize vegetation (269-270). The vegetative connection is something that William A. Nitze considers to be accurate as well, in his article “Is the Green Knight Story a Vegetative Myth?” (351-366). Furthermore, the vegetative connection can be found not only in the green knight’s green skin, but also in his ability to grow his head back after it becomes severed (The Gawain Poet 12-13). Lastly, the fact that the knight is depicted with a branch in his hand further enhances the knight’s vegetative connection (6). Henceforth, this

connection can therefore be interpreted in aspects of rejuvenation and fertility, and suggests the green knight as a symbol of nature.

The Green knight appears in Monmouth's *Historia* (ca 1136) as well and is likely to be based on an old mythological character called The Green man, who shares the knight's vegetative associations. In *Deformed Discourse: the Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (1996) David Williams sums up the green man:

The Green Man signifies irrepressible life....He is an image from the depths of prehistory; he appears and seems to die and then comes again after long forgettings at many periods in the past two thousand years. In his origins, he is much older than our Christian era. In all his appearances he is an image of renewal and rebirth. (14)

By this explanation it becomes clear that the green knight seems to share many, if not all, characteristics with the green man. Furthermore, Tolkien, Gordon and Davis suggest that there is a connection between the Green knight and the Green man as they write that "the greenness of the Knight, and his holly 'bob', are no doubt ultimately drawn from the popular belief in a 'green man'..." (XX). Hence, the Green Knight seems to draw his vegetative characteristics and features from an already recognized vegetative character in the myth of the green man. Therefore, it can be suggested that the green knight could be associated as a symbol (or metaphor) of nature.

Furthermore, in connection to *The Buried Giant*, the giant who is buried in Ishiguro's novel can be interpreted as the green knight from The Gawain poet's poem. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the knight is referred to as an "etayn" (20). David Williams explains that this word in the Gawain poet's time had the meaning of "giant" (269). Thus, the green knight is a giant, which is the first aspect of the connection suggested. Secondly, in the poem, the green knight's home, the green castle, is depicted as a kind of cavern (or mound) on top of a "hyze hil" (60-61). Furthermore, the place where the giant lay buried in *The Buried Giant* is portrayed in a similar way. The buried giant's resting place in Ishiguro's novel is first referenced when Beatrice tells Axl that "to one who doesn't know it, it's an ordinary hill" (34). Beatrice later calls the grave a "mound" (36) as well. The words Beatrice uses to describe the burial place are the same words used to describe the green knight's castle in the poem. The buried giant in Ishiguro's novel could then possibly be the green knight.

Further on, at the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the green knight will possibly wake up by the death of Querig. The warrior who finally finishes the dragon states that "the

giant, once well buried, now stirs...soon he rises, as surely he will" (340). First off, the fact that the green knight will possibly return by the death of Querig makes the reasons for Sir Gawain being Querig's warden clearer: the green knight is Gawain's old enemy. If he wakes up, he will likely want to take revenge on the now old and weary sir Gawain. So, if Querig dies then Gawain would probably die as well. Secondly, the connection between Querig's death as a catalyst for the green knight's possible rebirth can be suggested to be connected to nature.

The rebirth of nature would possibly be a fact if it is no longer colonized and there is no longer any pollution poisoning it. Since the green knight, as earlier sources concluded, is a symbol or metaphor for nature, rejuvenation and fertility, then both should go hand-in-hand and, so, if one returns so will the other. This means that if Querig dies human dominance over nature subsides which paves the way for nature to be rejuvenated and the green knight to be reborn.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed *The Buried Giant* from an ecocritical perspective. This essay first tried to show how the novel contains a toxic discourse and how Ishiguro's work portrays a world which suffers from an ecological mayhem. It was argued that the devastation of nature becomes set in motion by human actions, specifically from the ruling elite. Furthermore, the most important action resulting in devastation is first and foremost the colonization and imprisonment of the dragon Querig. This paper also tried to show how the world of *The Buried Giant* is tainted with pollution and, furthermore, how this pollution results in shattered ecosystems and a world without ecological balance and stability. In the second part of the analysis, this essay argued that the pollution is set in motion because of King Arthur's wish to transcend nature and Merlin's wish to create human alliances. Lastly, it was suggested that the death of Querig sparks the return of nature and the green knight.

This paper has used mainly ecocritical theories. Other sources have been used intertextually, ranging from criticism of aged romances, myths and legends to modern texts. These sources have been included to pave way for a thorough exhibition of ecocritical elements in *The Buried Giants*.

Time and space hinder this essay to analyze every element that could be of ecocritical interest in Ishiguro's novel. For instance, the character Edwin, who seems to be transforming into a dragon after a strange creature bites him, is left for another paper. The green island where all dead souls go, also remains for ecocritical study. This text primarily wanted to initiate an

ecocritical examination on *The Buried Giant* and provide a starting point for further discussion and has hopefully done just that.

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