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**ANALYSIS OF BIRDS IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE  
BURIED GIANT*  
BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015) is a fantasy novel about an old couple's journey across the land to find their son, which becomes a quest to find their memories and face their past. The thesis explores the meaning of birds in the novel, focusing specifically on memory studies and ecocritical theory. I argue that birds have symbolic and material relevance in the novel, which is connected to the main themes such as memory, environment and religion.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two main chapters – the literature review and empirical analysis – and a conclusion.

The introduction provides background for the thesis and gives an overview of the contents of the thesis. The aim of the thesis is also stated in the introduction.

The literature review provides an overview of previous research. It focuses on articles that explore topics such as environment, metaphors, memory, and intertextuality in *The Buried Giant*.

The second chapter consists of empirical analysis of the birds in the novel. It is divided into four parts. In the first sub-section, I provide examples from the novel to argue that birds symbolise transition. The second sub-section focuses on the depiction of birds at the monastery. The third sub-section discusses the three ghost-women who are resembling birds, and the last sub-section in this chapter focuses on the wren-eagle.

The conclusion summarises the main findings of the thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

Kazuo Ishiguro is a Japanese-born British writer, who has received many accolades, most notably A Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. He is perhaps best known for his critically acclaimed novels *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Ishiguro's seventh novel, *The Buried Giant* (2015) sees the author continue his genre-exploration. The novel contains fantasy elements and is set in Post-Arthurian Britain. The story follows an old couple, Axl and Beatrice, who experience memory loss. It is made clear from the beginning that memory loss plagues the whole country, and not simply the protagonists. Axl and Beatrice can recall that they have a son, who they believe to live in a nearby village, so together they embark on a journey across the land enshrouded by a mysterious mist to find their son. However, during their journey, it becomes less about finding their son and more about uncovering the truth about their memory loss. Axl and Beatrice meet several important characters during their journey. In the Saxon village, they meet a Saxon warrior Wistan who is secretly on a quest to slay the dragon Querig, and a Saxon boy Edwin. They also encounter Sir Gawain, whose duty is to protect Querig. In the end, when Wistan has killed the dragon, it turns out that memory loss was caused by the mist, which was really the dragon Querig's breath. King Arthur ordered Merlin to put a spell on Querig to produce the amnesiac mist to make people forget about the atrocities committed by Britons against Saxons during a bloody conflict. The novel continues to address similar themes to Ishiguro's previous works; for instance, the themes of memory and aging, and more specifically the relationship between collective and individual memory, which are prevalent in his earlier works such as *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *When We Were Orphans* (2000). Ishiguro's concern with environmental issues has become clearer in his later work; the best examples of this being

*The Buried Giant* (2015) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021). Both novels allude to pollution, for example, which causes harm to nature and the characters.

In the first part of the thesis, I will provide an overview of what scholars have written about *The Buried Giant* in relation to the specific interest of this thesis. The literature review will discuss the theme of memory in Ishiguro's other works and *The Buried Giant*, the environmental aspects of the novel, and its use of metaphors as well as intertextual elements.

The second part of the thesis focuses on my analysis of *The Buried Giant*, in which I will analyse specific textual examples from the novel where birds appear. I do so to support the argument that Ishiguro's birds are both symbolic and material. I argue that birds' symbolic and material relevance in the novel is Ishiguro's way of commenting on the larger themes of the novel, including memory, religion, and nature. To argue this, I will draw from memory studies and ecocritical theory. I will lean on critics who work with memory studies, specifically Yugin Teo's article about Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, and Caroline Hovanec, whose *Notes on Vermin* (2025) is a work of animal studies, a subfield of ecocriticism. I use the definition provided by Tajane et al (2024) which describes ecocriticism as:

a literary and cultural theory [that] examines the representation of nature and environmental concerns in literary works. This approach not only focuses on how literature depicts the natural world but also on how these representations influence and reflect societal attitudes towards the environment. (Tajane et al 2024: 2163)

Accordingly, ecocritical approach in this thesis translates to analysis of how birds are depicted in *The Buried Giant*, and how their depiction reflects the attitudes of characters towards nature. I make use of the term 'memory spaces' from Yugin Teo's article "Monuments, Unreal Spaces and National Forgetting: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* and the Abyss of Memory" to argue that the birds' presence in the instances where memory spaces occur, the birds symbolise transition from one state of being to another, or being in two different states at the same time

(liminality/duality). This is exemplified by the ‘transition’ of the three ghost women who ultimately become Death incarnate, the hybrid form of the wren-eagle which combines two different species of bird, and the ambiguity of the way in which the monks perceive the dark-feathered birds at the monastery (they are simultaneously described by monk Erasmus as the agents of the devil, and by Father Brian as the agents of God).

## **1 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON *THE BURIED GIANT***

The following literature review is divided into four sections based on the main topics of previous research. This literature review aims to give an overview of what has been written about *The Buried Giant* (2015) by others and identify what needs further research. Related to the topic of environment, previous research has mainly focused on the novel’s landscape (including its symbolic meanings and how it is depicted in the novel) and the mist (both as a metaphor related to forgetting, and as a type of pollution), while animals and birds that appear in the novel have largely been overlooked in these conversations. Therefore, since there are not many articles written specifically about the role of birds in *The Buried Giant*, the literature review will give an overview of what the previous research has been focused on, while prioritizing the articles that are closest to the topic of this thesis.

The literature review will show how abstract ideas such as memory manifest in the environment, therefore indicating that the natural-material environment in the story is also used in symbolic ways. I argue that since birds are also part of the natural environment, their presence in the novel may also carry symbolic meaning related to the main themes of the novel such as the importance of memories and forgetting, and environmental issues.

The first sub-section of the literature review is dedicated to the topic of environment. It is pointed out in this chapter how Ishiguro uses natural environment to explore the central themes of the novel. The second sub-section focuses on the themes of memory and ageing in *The Buried Giant*. It will be discussed how *The Buried Giant* differs from Ishiguro's previous novels in handling these themes. Lastly, since I will discuss different intertextual links that are revealed through birds, it is relevant to mention what other researchers have written about intertextuality in *The Buried Giant*. The literature review includes peer-reviewed academic articles that the author had access to.

## 1.1 Environment

As a work of fantasy fiction with medieval setting, much emphasis is placed on nature in *The Buried Giant*. Many articles point out how Ishiguro's landscape in *The Buried Giant* carries more meaning in the story than would initially seem. For example, Russell (2021) points out how *The Buried Giant* subverts the pastoral ideal of the English landscape. Russell (2021: 300) highlights that "Ishiguro challenges William Blake's ideal of England as a "green and pleasant land" showing us the horror that lurks under or on the bucolic surface of this world." He juxtaposes two novels by Ishiguro – *The Buried Giant* and *The Remains of the Day*, both of which, he suggests, subvert the pastoral subgenre. He argues that both novels

lift the veil from the pastoral view of English landscape as calm, peaceful, lovely, a view that continues to be promulgated by tourist boards and which prevents our deeper exploration of the violence etched deeply upon and lying deep below the rural English landscape. (Russell 2021: 300)

It is therefore established that the way in which the landscape is depicted in the novel also reflects the state of the world in which the characters operate. In *The Buried Giant*, the horrors of war forgotten by the characters are still very much present in nature, being perhaps the only evidence of these horrific events. One such example appears in the form of memorials, which are mentioned

by Yugin Teo (2023). According to Teo, memorials are specific sites related to individual and collective memories. He also provides an example from the novel: “The cairn in *The Buried Giant*, a monument that acts as a marker of one’s close proximity to Querig, is made up of stacked heavy stones ‘above a man’s height’ and situated oddly on an incline near the mountain top, with ‘no feature around it to explain its presence’ (Teo 2023: 515).” He points out that it is impossible to know what the giant’s cairn was initially supposed to represent and explains that memorials can even become devoid of their intended meaning after enough time has passed, after which “the memorial becomes ‘a place of the mind, an abstraction, a haunted idea’ (Teo 2023: 515).” Therefore, the cairn for example, can also symbolise the lost memories of the past. While the memories related to the cairn’s meaning are gone, the very fact that it exists is a haunting reminder of the process of forgetting memories of the past. The cairn is also an example of how an abstract idea such as memory can take physical form in the landscape.

The landscape also works as a tool in *The Buried Giant* that connects personal and collective memories, Falcus & Oró-Piqueras (2020: 3) highlight the importance of landscape in representing the individual and collective past in the novel:

The fantastic landscape through which the characters travel is employed in a highly metaphorical way that implicitly links ageing bodies and the land through the secrets and experiences (the history) that they share. (Falcus & Oró-Piqueras 2020: 3)

Falcus and Oró-Piqueras (2020: 4) highlight that the characters’ interpretations of the past are affected by their personal experiences and can only be subjective as a result. This is exemplified by Axl’s and Wistan’s (the warrior who accompanies Axl and Beatrice for parts of their journey) contrasting interpretations of the monastery’s bloody history. Another great example of such instance comes from the third chapter in the novel, where Axl and Beatrice’s memories of an encounter with a man who praised Beatrice’s beauty differ from each other. Axl remembers feeling pride while Beatrice remembers Axl’s jealousy. Axl replies to Beatrice: “It’s not how I remember

it, princess. Perhaps I just made a show of being jealous as a sort of jest (Ishiguro 2021: 89).” Falcus and Oró-Piqueras point out another example from the novel where “a bat in a tunnel is seen by Beatrice as a dead baby, a poignant reminder of her own lost child, whilst Axl sees only the bat (Falcus & Oró-Piqueras 2020: 4).” This example shows perhaps even more clearly how the individual past is reflected in the landscape. These examples, the authors suggest, illustrate how “landscape and the bodies that traverse this become interpretable and unstable evidence of the past.” Russell also highlights the importance of Axl’s memories starting to come back to him in the chapter that reveals the violent landscape hidden beneath the tranquil surface of the monastery, as it demonstrates Ishiguro’s goal of “fusing actual terrain and the figurative landscape of memory” (Russell 2021: 307).

As these examples clearly show, the landscapes acquire different meanings depending on the character whose perspective they are described through. In these instances, the landscape is defined through the anthropocentric lens and related to how human experience attributes meaning to it. Alexander Sloots (2020) points out Gawain’s anthropocentric views in the following passage: “these may well be Merlin’s woods, and made for this very purpose: that I may some day shelter here (Ishiguro 2016: 297, as cited by Sloots 2020).” Sloots argues that Gawain’s perception of the wood is anthropocentric, because he thinks its only purpose is to provide him shelter. Another aspect about this passage, which deserves attention, is the fact that he calls the woods ‘Merlin’s woods’ as if they belonged to the wizard.

To challenge the anthropocentric view, Sloots provides an ecocritical reading of *The Buried Giant*. His analysis draws from Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* (2012), which provides the theoretical framework for his essay. He mentions how *The Buried Giant* uses wilderness, pollution and apocalypse related tropes. He argues, for example, that the mist can be read as pollution and draws

parallels between the mist in *The Buried Giant* and the pollution in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). He points out that the effect of the mist is similar to the pollution in *Silent Spring* since both can cause fatalities. There are similarities in the description of the pollution as well, since Carson compares the pollution to an evil spell, while in *The Buried Giant*, the mist is literally caused by an evil spell. Sloots argues that the emergence of animal-hybrids in *The Buried Giant* can be interpreted as a sign of apocalypse. He also draws parallels between the animal-hybrids in *The Buried Giant* and the Chernobyl disaster, arguing that the animal hybrids may have emerged as a result of the mist since they resemble the Chernobyl mutations, which were also a cause of an environmental disaster. I will return to his discussion of animal hybrids in greater detail later, in my analysis of wren-eagle – the bird hybrid – in the second part of my thesis.

### **1.1.2 Metaphors**

*The Buried Giant* is full of metaphors and a great number of articles focus on metaphors in the novel. The most obvious metaphor is perhaps that of the buried giant itself. Burow-Flak (2019: 247) compares *The Buried Giant* to Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, suggesting that both novels utilize fantasy elements to explore the theme of genocide, and facilitate a thoughtful exploration of forgiveness and forgetting. The giant's body, Burow-Flak suggests, is a metaphor, which represents recollections of mass slaughter in both novels. Importantly, he also points out how the metaphor of the buried giant is tied to geographical places in Ishiguro's novel; an example of this would be the burial mound (Burow-Flak 2019: 249). Therefore, the metaphor of the buried giant is once again related to nature and reflects how the novel symbolically uses landscape, emphasizing the potential to use ecocritical theory when analysing the novel. That the creatures' physical bodies represent something abstract such as memories of genocide is mentioned in

another article. For example, Wan-Chuan Kao (2021) emphasizes that “The dragon’s lungs have become the literal and figurative lungs of the body politic (Kao 2021: 17).”

Another metaphor related to bodies is highlighted by Hopârtean (2019) who points out Ishiguro’s use of wound as a metaphor embodying a painful past which still affects the person in the present. Not only are the wounds causing pain in the characters, but Hopârtean underlines that the wounds can also help the characters achieve something. This is best exemplified by Edwin’s (the Saxon boy who accompanies Axl and Beatrice in parts of their journey) wound which creates a bond between Edwin and Querig and helps the characters find the dragon’s lair. Another example used by Hopârtean is Beatrice’s painful foot, which gives the characters a reason to go to the monastery and forces them to face the dark truths of the past. The wounds, Hopârtean adds, can also be linked to superstition, as the taking away of Axl and Beatrice’s candle is implied to have caused the pain in Beatrice. Finally, Hopârtean also points out Father Jonus’s self-inflicted wounds that stand for a “primitive take on religion. (Hopârtean 2019: 149)” Bearing in mind the specific focus of this thesis, it is important to note that Jonus’s wounds are caused by birds.

The significance of that part of the novel which discusses the wounds caused by birds is also emphasized by Yiping (2021), who describes the scene where the monks are plagued by their conscience after having cared for the dragon for all these years, which compels them to take turns in the cage and expose their bodies to the crows and ravens as an act of punishment. Eventually, they divide into two groups: those who believe that their ongoing sacrifices suffice, and the others who argue it is time to “uncover what’s been hidden” or perhaps *buried*. The monks, Yiping (2021: 238) argues, represent the struggle between our necessity for remembrance to define our identities, the conscious or unconscious acts of forgetting required for survival, and the conflict between fear and hope, hatred and forgiveness.

In *The Buried Giant*, memories, therefore, are not merely something abstract, but they take physical form, either through landscape or wounds on the body. It is worth noting that a bird metaphor has been used by one of the characters in the novel – Wistan – to talk about the fleeting memories: “This country awakens so many memories, though each seems like some restless sparrow I know will flee any moment into the breeze (Ishiguro 2021: 123).”

## 1.2 Memory and Ageing

As my analysis relies partially on memory studies, it is relevant to further outline some of the articles here that discuss how this topic is handled in *The Buried Giant*. Yugin Teo’s article, for example provides valuable insight into the concept of ‘memory spaces’ which proves to be useful in analysing the presence of birds in the novel. Memory-related themes are prevalent in all of Kazuo Ishiguro’s works and therefore most articles mention these themes to some capacity, as also mentioned earlier. The significance of the theme of memory is also apparent in *The Buried Giant*, as evidenced in the preceding chapter. Since most of Ishiguro’s novels are in some way connected to the themes of memory or ageing, it is no surprise that many researchers have compared *The Buried Giant* to his other works, such as *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986).

Numerable articles focus more specifically on the relationship between collective and individual memory in *The Buried Giant* (Teo 2022, Falcus & Oró-Piqueras 2020, Yiping 2021). This is discussed, for example, by Yugin Teo (2022: 506) who points out Ishiguro’s “long-standing concern with the theme of collective memory.” His article juxtaposes *The Buried Giant* with Ishiguro’s other novels to reevaluate his reflections on collective memory throughout his oeuvre. According to Teo, *The Buried Giant* differs from Ishiguro’s other novels, since the topics of

collective memory and repression are addressed more directly and not vaguely through individual experiences of the protagonists like in his previous works. He also argues that whereas the main focus of memory studies had previously been on remembrance and not so much on the importance of forgetting, Ishiguro made forgetting primary theme of *The Buried Giant*. He states that “Through examining the memory work in *The Buried Giant*, we can observe Ishiguro’s penetrating enquiry into collective memory, forgetting, and memorialisation through the innovative use of memory spaces, a critical engagement with monuments as sites of memory, and the utilisation of forgetting as a challenge to the sacralisation of memory (Teo 2022: 523).”

Yugin Teo has used the term ‘memory spaces’ which he defines as “spaces that bridge the past and present, as well as the dream world and the real world in the context of the narrative (Teo 2022: 510).” He argues that ‘memory spaces’ occur in many of Ishiguro’s earlier works, as well as in *The Buried Giant*. He points out several instances from Ishiguro’s earlier novels, where memory spaces occur:

There is a sense of being in a waking dream that suffuses the narrative in these instances with a certain strangeness, evoking dream-like scenes from Ishiguro’s earlier novels, such as the hazy memories of floating worlds in *An Artist of the Floating World*, or unexpected and surreal encounters with the past inside the unnamed city in *The Unconsoled*. (Teo 2022: 510)

The discussion of ‘memory spaces’ is specifically relevant to this thesis because I argue that the birds often appear in the story in instances where memory spaces also occur. For example, Teo argues that in the first chapter, the waking moments of Axl are an instance of memory spaces, since his memories start coming back to him. Other examples he mentions are Gawain’s reveries which “indicate moments of dreamlike thoughts and the first one sees Gawain describing a waking moment as he recounts a visitation in his dreams by a woman he once was attracted to (Teo 2022: 511),” and Edwin’s hallucinations. He also mentions site-specific memory spaces such as the ruins of the old Roman villa, where Axl and Beatrice meet the bird-like woman for the first time, or the

monastery which is filled with dark-feathered birds. Interestingly, most of the examples he provides are related to birds somehow. Teo argues that

Ishiguro's prose generates a strong contrast between the darkness of the tunnels and burial ground, and the moonlight that lends an unreal quality to the scenes of the encounter with the beast, and the emergence into day light that signals the end of the encounter both with the beast and the memories of old wars. The underground space compels Axl, Beatrice and Gawain to bear witness to the 'old slaughter' that took place within the grounds of the monastery, whilst also triggering Gawain's repressed memories of battle, as the slaughter of the Saxon community continues to weigh heavily on his conscience. (Teo 2022: 512)

This example seems to further express the idea that physical sites are used symbolically to comment on the main themes of the novel. In this instance, the darkness of the tunnel seems to represent repressed memories, and going through the tunnel represents how the characters must face these memories. The passage mentioned by Teo also highlights the novel's use of darkness and light in symbolic ways, which will be discussed further in my analysis of birds. Teo also mentions memorials and monuments as a specific type of memory space. As mentioned earlier, there are various examples across Ishiguro's oeuvre, which also highlight his tendency to use physical environment symbolically (see Teo 2022: 516).

Both Yiping (2021) and Teo (2022) emphasize the critical role of memory in shaping identity. Yiping (2021) focuses on how collective memory influences group identity and the political manipulation of such memories by elites. He argues that the actions of the manipulative elites, like King Arthur or Wistan, illustrate how memories of violence are constructed and utilized for political gain. He also suggests that the suppression or distortion of traumatic memories can lead to unresolved tensions and hinder reconciliation among disparate groups. Teo (2022) examines the concept of enforced forgetting, suggesting that Ishiguro critiques the political necessity for nations to forget painful pasts to maintain peace. Teo refers to the mist in the novel as a metaphor for this enforced amnesia, which obscures the historical atrocities committed by King Arthur against the Saxons. What makes the previous discussion relevant to the current thesis, however, is how this manipulation of memories by the elites occurs in the novel. This is pointed

out by Wan-Chuan Kao (2021) who argues that *The Buried Giant* can be considered a form of environmental writing, rather than fantasy. He uses Michel Foucault's term 'environmentality,' which in Kao's reading of *The Buried Giant* is understood as violence targeted against the milieu surrounding people rather than violence targeted directly against the bodies of these individuals (Kao 2021: 15). Therefore, Kao suggests that through enforced forgetting which is carried out by using Querig's lungs as a weapon, King Arthur is complicit in an act of environmental terrorism. "Atmoterrorism is an attack on the enemy's environment-dependent vital functions, namely breathing, regulation of the central nervous system and liveable temperature and radiation conditions. (Kao 2021: 17)"

### **1.3 Intertextuality**

*The Buried Giant* is a novel that offers multiple possibilities for intertextual readings. The most obvious allusions would be to Arthurian tales and the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (see, for example Sloots 2020, Miller & Vernon 2018). This is evident from the fact that King Arthur, Merlin and Sir Gawain are characters in the novel, although only the latter appears physically, whereas the others are only mentioned through memories of their legacy.

Anni Shen's (2021a) article offers most compelling insights to this thesis, since she mentions birds and their symbolic meanings in *The Buried Giant*. Shen argues that *The Buried Giant* includes intertextual references to *Ugetsu* (1953) and other Japanese films, as well as Japanese Buddhist myth and folklore, which Ishiguro uses to create pagan discourse existing parallel to the dominant Christian plot. The article highlights the many meanings of birds in Japanese mythology and how they relate to Ishiguro's work. In my analysis, I will discuss the appearance of the three women in the story, whom Anni Shen (2021a) mentions in her article. She refers to them as 'ghost-women'. Shen argues that "Ishiguro uses a bird /.../ as the incarnation of

something eerie that foreshadows the departure (death) of the wife (2022b: 434).” Shen argues that the three ghost-women are all, in fact, one and the same character. It is relevant to mention that in two instances out of three, these women are described as resembling a great bird or being ‘bird-like’ due to their garments flapping in the wind, for example. Shen’s article provides significant insight into these appearances and offers an interesting way to interpret the novel’s use of bird symbolism, since most other articles that have discussed intertextuality, have only mentioned texts belonging to the Western cultures. Although Shen’s main argument is not about birds, it becomes evident from the examples she provides that there are strong connections between birds and religion in the novel.

Stacy (2022: 1037) points out a different scene, where a group of old women are mistaken by Sir Gawain to be great birds, which he believes to echo Aeschylus’s *The Eumenides*, in which the Furies are described similarly to how Sir Gawain perceives them. The Furies’ characteristic of seeking revenge also ties them to the women resembling birds in Ishiguro’s novel. The ghost women mentioned in Shen’s article can therefore also be likened to the Furies, which shows that various interpretations are possible.

Many researchers have proposed that the boatman in *The Buried Giant* resembles Charon from Greek mythology. Axl and Beatrice meet the boatman twice during their journey. It is at the end of the novel when the boatman wants to take them across the lake separately, which signals the end of their journey together. Yugin Teo (2022: 519) suggests that the island where the boatman wants to take Axl and Beatrice recalls Lethe – the river of amnesia – from Greek mythology, and the boatman resembles Charon – a mythical ferryman who transports dead souls to the underworld.

Shen, once again offers a different perspective, arguing that the boatman could be the god Jizō from Buddhist tradition, who she explains is a “guardian of the children and travellers’ from the dark river of unborn souls. (Shen 2021a: 222)”

## **Conclusion**

The literature review demonstrates how the novel uses the natural environment of the fictional world to comment on abstract ideas such as memory. Falcus and Oró-Piqueras (2020) highlight that the way different characters describe their surroundings reflects how their memories and experiences shape their perception of the world. Similarly, in my analysis I point out how the description of dark birds at the monastery might reveal the subconscious fears and biases of Axl.

I mentioned briefly Alexander Sloots’ essay, which is one of the few ecocritical readings of the novel, and which I will refer to in my own analysis, specifically regarding the discussion about animal hybrids. The main takeaway from Sloots is the connection that he makes between the mist which he sees as representing pollution, and the animal hybrids that emerge as a direct cause of the mist. This connection is important to my own analysis because it provides a possibility to analyse the symbolism of the wren-eagle from the perspective that this species is born as a direct cause of the mist.

In the section where I pointed out different metaphors that various articles mentioned, the connection was established between a wound metaphor pointed out by Hopârtean (2019), and birds. The wound is suggested to be a metaphor representing a painful past still affecting the person in the present. It is related to birds since Father Jonus’s wounds are caused by birds. This connection already implies that birds could have a more symbolic meaning related to memories or the past, which is something I will discuss in my analysis. For this purpose, I will use Yugin Teo’s

(2022) term ‘memory spaces’ to argue that birds often appear in moments which can be called ‘memory spaces’.

Yiping’s (2021) and Teo’s (2022) articles highlight the importance of memory in shaping one’s identity, and how in *The Buried Giant* the taking away of the characters’ memories by King Arthur is an act of political manipulation. According to Wan-Chuan Kao’s (2021) ecocritical reading, such erasure of memories via Querig’s mist can be seen as environmental terrorism. This discussion is relevant to my analysis of the wren-eagle, because I argue that the wren-eagle might symbolise the punishment for poor treatment of nature that is the result of King Arthur’s actions.

Lastly, I pointed out some intertextual references that can be found in *The Buried Giant*. Anni Shen provides a deeper analysis of the meaning of birds in the novel, which will be useful in my analysis of the ghost-women.

## **2 ANALYSIS OF BIRDS**

Leaning on ecocriticism and memory studies, I will analyse specific examples from Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* where birds appear to show that Ishiguro’s birds are both symbolic and material. I argue that birds’ symbolic and material relevance in the novel is Ishiguro’s way of commenting on the larger themes of the novel, including memory, religion, and nature, much like he uses physical environment for similar purposes.

The following analysis is divided into four parts. The first part focuses on birds more generally, whereas the three remaining parts each focus on different bird types or species.

### **2.1 Bird as a Symbol of Transition and Beguilement**

I argue that birds symbolize, among other things, a transition from one state of being to another, or being in two different states simultaneously in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* (2015). The

transition usually happens when the characters experience what Yugin Teo (2023) has termed as ‘memory spaces.’ I argue that birds’ appearance in these instances where memory spaces occur symbolises liminality – belonging to two different states at the same time. In the following analysis, I will highlight the most important cases in which birds can be perceived this way.

Birds appear early in the novel, already in the first chapter. The first character introduced to the reader is Axl. The third-person narrator describes how Axl left his bed early in the morning and went outside the warren where he and his wife Beatrice live, to wait for the first signs of daylight. Next, it is described how “he had become so absorbed in his thoughts that by the time he realized how cold he was, the stars had all but gone, a glow was spreading on the horizon, and the first notes of birdsong were emerging from the dimness. (Ishiguro 2021: 5)” Yugin Teo (2023) has argued that the scene described above is an example of a memory space. I argue that birdsong is one of the markers signalling the shift or transition from a hazy dream world to reality. “By the time he realized how cold he was” indicates that for a moment, Axl had completely dismissed his bodily sensations as if his mind was separated from his body. The birdsong seems to cause him to snap out of the ‘memory space’. The birdsong in the previous example is also a probable symbol of the arrival of spring as well as morning-time because birds are generally associated with new beginnings. In his book *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Michael Ferber (1999) writes that “[t]he symbolism of birds is sometimes metonymical in origin, as when larks represent dawn and nightingales night, or swallows and cuckoos stand for the arrival of spring, because the birds belong to these phenomena (Ferber 1999: 25–26).” This explanation could be applied to the said example from the novel, although Ishiguro is not specific about the species of the songbirds. It is also stated in the novel that “[i]t was spring, but the air still felt bitter /.../ (Ishiguro 2021: 5),” which indicates that it is perhaps still early spring, reinforcing the transitional element.

The temporal setting in this passage, being before dawn and at the onset of spring, is noteworthy. It reinforces the sense that things are about to change because morning and spring can be associated with new beginnings. Furthermore, it is described how the birdsong emerges from the dimness. The use of the word ‘dimness’ rather than ‘darkness’ indicates a transition from darkness to light. In contrast, it is described how “[i]nside, the passageways of the warren were still in complete darkness.” The word ‘dim’ can also relate to Axl’s memories, which are slowly coming back to him but are still not quite clear in his mind. It is described how Axl “had this morning succeeded in remembering a number of things that had eluded him for some time (Ishiguro 2021: 5–6).” It is also reinforced once more that the memories had come to him during the time he spent outside the warren: “Earlier, outside, small fragments of a remembrance had come back to him /.../. But now, as earlier outside, nothing would quite settle in his mind, and the more he concentrated, the fainter the fragments seemed to grow. (Ishiguro 2021: 7)” As the analysis above suggests, there are multiple details in that passage specifically, which hint towards a renewal of sorts or a new beginning. The idea that the birds in *The Buried Giant’s* first chapter could symbolise the start of Axl and Beatrice’s journey will be reinforced later.

The last mention of birds in the first chapter of the novel is also through song: “Outside the birds were now in chorus. Beatrice turned her gaze towards the window and the sun leaking past the cloth hung over it (Ishiguro 2021: 28).” In this instance, birds may reflect the optimistic mood of the characters since they appear in the story at a point when they decide to go looking for their son. Another example that seems to indicate the affirmative connotations of birdsong comes from the second chapter:

Their path, though muddy at times, remained defined and never took them out of the sunlight /.../ Then a valley appeared to their right, reminding them of the power and mystery of the Great Plain, and that they were now trespassing on but a small corner of it. /.../ Beatrice continued every five or six steps to chant, in the manner of a litany, the question: ‘Are you still there, Axl?’ to which he would respond: ‘Still here, princess.’ /.../ All the while Axl watched for fast-moving mist or sudden darkenings in the sky, but there came no hint of either, and then they

had put the Great Plain behind them. As they climbed through a small wood full of songbirds, Beatrice made no comment, but he could see her whole posture relax, and her refrain came to an end. (Ishiguro 2021: 35–36)

The passage above is significant in multiple ways. Firstly, it indicates that darkness is something to be afraid of in the world of this novel, and therefore, it is emphasized that the path “never took them out of the sunlight”. It is important to note that the novel seems to use darkness and light in symbolic ways, and not only when describing what time of day it is. For example, it seems that birds with darker feathers have a different meaning than songbirds that announce the arrival of morning and spring with their song. This will become more apparent in later chapters of the novel, where dark-feathered birds are described as sinister. Coming back to the passage above, it is apparent that songbirds are used in this instance to create a sense of security. It could even be said that they create a false sense of security since, after that moment, they will encounter the ghost-woman for the second time, as well as the mysterious boatman. The songbirds once more appear in the story to signify a change in the characters’ moods. A moment before the appearance of the birds, Beatrice and Axl had been alert, but once they arrived at the wood filled with songbirds, they were at ease and lost their focus.

These two mentions of birdsong are not the only instances where birds appear in the first chapter. Axl recalls a moment in the past when everyone in the warren was looking for a girl who had gone missing until they were distracted by the mention of a wren-eagle by two shepherds. “[O]ne of them announced how the day before they had watched a wren-eagle circle above their heads, once, twice, then a third time.” The wren-eagle seems to work as a distraction from the disappearance of the girl and, therefore, may symbolise the transition from remembering to forgetting. The appearance of the wren-eagle further indicates that birds (and their singing) can be beguiling.

As I have established with the discussion above, I argue that songbirds are especially deceptive since they seem harmless, but in many instances in the novel, they appear before a significant moment occurs in the novel. Parallels could be drawn to Greek mythology, more specifically with the Sirens, who, in some cases, were described as having bird-like features and whose song was alluring. Sirens appeared for the first time in literature in the *Odyssey* and *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes (Aasved 1996: 383).

In them the Sirens, whose irresistible voices and enchanting songs lured passing ships to destruction on the rocky coast of their island home, represent just one of many obstacles that Odysseus and Jason, the heroes of these narratives, had to overcome on their respective voyages. (Aasved 1996: 383)

The birds in *The Buried Giant* are undoubtedly less dangerous and do not pose a significant threat to the characters. However, I would argue that through Edwin's character, the parallels between the Siren mythology and the beguiling birdsong in *The Buried Giant* become more apparent. Edwin is a Saxon boy whom a baby dragon has bitten, and because of which he begins to transform into a dragon himself. It is not clearly stated what exactly would happen to him, but he is at least connected to the she-dragon Querig. His condition is explained to Axl and Beatrice by Sir Gawain:

That's no ogre's bite the boy carries. It's a dragon gave him that wound. I saw it right away when yesterday that soldier raised his shirt. Who knows how he met with a dragon, but a dragon's bite it is, and now the desire will be rising in his blood to seek congress with a she-dragon. And in turn, any she-dragon near enough to scent him will come seeking him. This is why master Wistan is so fond of his protégé, sir. He believes master Edwin will lead him to Querig. And for this same reason, the monks and these soldiers would have him dead. Look, the boy grows ever wilder. (Ishiguro 2021: 199)

Interestingly, the reason for these last words is the fact that Edwin has begun to sing strangely.

Earlier in the same chapter it is described how

Indeed, Edwin had started to sing; faintly at first so that Axl had thought the boy was simply soothing his nerves, but then his voice had become steadily more conspicuous. His song seemed to be a slow lullaby, and he was rendering it with his face to the wall, his body rocking gently. (Ishiguro 2021: 196)

Gawain even remarks that “[t]he boy behaves as one bewitched (Ishiguro 2021: 196).” In this context, it is the one who is ‘bewitched’ that sings, but the song itself still signifies the act of

beguilement or being beguiled since Edwin himself is not in control of his body when he sings.

This is evident in the way he moves while singing:

Sure enough, Edwin was singing once more, not as loudly as before, but now in a curious posture. He had bent forward, a fist to each temple, and was moving slowly about in the shadows like someone in a dance enacting the part of an animal. (Ishiguro 2021: 198)

That he has raised a fist to each temple might be a sign that he is hearing voices again, like he did in chapter four, when he was in the barn. In chapter four it is indicated that the voices belong to his mother but in the passage mentioned earlier where Gawain explains Edwin's condition, it becomes clear that it is the she-dragon that is calling him. Since Edwin misinterprets the voices as his mother's, Edwin's singing can be read as reinforcement of the idea that the song itself is a sign of deception. Although the songbirds are not described as having such an extreme effect on the characters with their song, there is still evidence from previously discussed examples from the novel that the songbirds can be deceptive in the sense that their appearance provides the characters with false sense of security.

## **2.2 Dark-feathered birds (at the monastery)**

Earlier, I explored the symbolic use of dark-feathered birds, and the songbirds contrasted to them. This becomes more apparent in the sixth chapter, which starts with Axl not being able to sleep, despite being tired. It is explained that the reason for his inability to sleep could be the fact that he is not used to sleeping above the ground. For context, in this chapter Axl and Beatrice have arrived at the monastery and spend the night there. It is then stated that

[P]erhaps his restlessness /.../ had to do with the presence of the birds in the dark above. They were now largely silent, but every so often would come a small rustle, or a beating of wings, and he would feel the urge to fling his arms over Beatrice's sleeping form to protect her from the foul feathers drifting down through the air. (Ishiguro 2021: 145)

“They were now largely silent” indicates that the birds were making sounds before. In contrast to the earlier instances where Axl and Beatrice are exposed to the song of birds, these birds at the

monastery are described in a different manner. There is an indication of disdain in the way Axl sees these birds. For example, the feathers are described as ‘foul’, so much so that Axl feels the need to ‘protect’ Beatrice from them. However, there could be a more symbolic meaning to that passage. Since it is described how the feathers are “drifting down through the air,” they could stand for the disease spreading with the mist. Although it is never explained what causes the pain in Beatrice, it seems likely that it was caused by the mist. Earlier, in the fifth chapter of *The Buried Giant*, Beatrice ponders about the cause of her pain: “I was thinking maybe it’s because of our lack of a candle I first took this pain I now have. /.../ I was thinking it was maybe the darkness did it. (Ishiguro 2021: 115)” She then explains that there was an evil sprite seen near their village, who might have hidden in their chamber and brought her the pain, for the sprite was fond of darkness. The similarities between these two passages – one that describes a conversation between Axl and Beatrice, and another that is from Axl’s point of view – reinforce the idea that in darkness hides that which is evil. The passage where Axl feels the urge to protect Beatrice from the ‘foul’ feathers also evokes a scene later in the novel:

She was standing at the cairn much as before, and though something in her posture again tugged at him, he was relieved to find in himself no trace of the earlier bitterness. Instead he felt almost overcome by an urge to defend her, not just from the harsh wind, but from something else large and dark even then gathering around them. (Ishiguro 2021: 310)

The above passage indicates Axl’s awareness of the seriousness of Beatrice’s pain, which could even end with her death. Since the passage also has obvious similarities to the earlier-mentioned passage where Axl describes the birds at the monastery, it also reinforces the idea that the dark birds are related to death. The mention of something dark gathering around Axl and Beatrice also evokes a similar instance in *Gawain’s Second Reverie*, where Gawain ponders that “His [King Arthur’s] shadow still falls across the land and engulfs me (Ishiguro 2021: 295–296).” Considering that the previous passage happens at the cairn, which is a clear instance of a memory

space, that “something else large and dark” felt by Axl could refer to the past doings of King Arthur, whose shadow is ever-present in the story, and ‘engulfs’ the land long after his passing. Significantly, Axl might be haunted by King Arthur’s legacy because Axl was his knight, as appears when the amnesia-mist starts to lift. Axl might subconsciously be aware of the prospect of hatred that will ensue after Querig’s passing, and when painful memories of the past are revealed. The above passage also indicates that although some memories may be gone, they still affect the characters, without them necessarily being aware of it. This explains the bitterness he suddenly feels against Beatrice without knowing the cause. Therefore, the sudden urge to protect Beatrice might also be related to the cairn, which, due to its proximity to the dragon’s lair, is closely associated with King Arthur’s deeds and Axl’s complicity in them. The sudden feeling of some unknown threat is his subconscious, because although his memories are hidden away, they are not completely erased, and only waiting to be resurfaced.

Coming back to the earlier-described scene at the monastery, the presence of the birds could also be seen as foreshadowing since not long after Axl, Beatrice, Wistan and Edwin have arrived at the monastery, it is revealed that the monks lead them to danger. The narrator continues to describe the birds:

The birds had been there when they had first entered the chamber earlier in the day. And had he not felt, even then, something malevolent in the way these crows, blackbirds, woodpigeons looked down on them from the rafters? Or was it just that his memory had become coloured by subsequent events? (Ishiguro 2021: 145)

This passage is significant, because it mentions the specific species of these birds. In Christian symbolism, blackbird has been associated with the darkness of sin, alluring temptations of the flesh, as well as the Devil (Ferguson 1961: 13). It is important to note that one of the monks named Irasmus also calls these birds ‘demons’ and ‘agents of the devil’ later in the same chapter, to which Father Brian replies “They may yet be agents of God, Irasmus. We don’t yet know. (Ishiguro 2021: 148)” Irasmus then claims: “I know them to be of the devil! Look at their eyes! How can they be

of God and gaze at us with such eyes?” Anni Shen (2021a) argues that “[the dark birds] are seen as a challenge to the Christian faith and a sign to the monks to stop praying for God’s forgiveness (Shen 2021a: 218).” In contrast, Sloots (2020) argues that the monks see the presence of the birds as a sign of God’s discontent with the human treatment of nature. As these two opposing viewpoints illustrate, it is unclear what the birds at the monastery are supposed to communicate to the monks or the readers.

I mentioned earlier that blackbirds are also associated with temptations of the flesh. Considering the ending of the novel, in which it is revealed that Beatrice was not faithful to Axl in their marriage, the earlier passages can be interpreted to reflect Axl’s resistance to accept such memories, but it is not the only possibility.

I am more interested, however, in the mention of woodpigeons and the discourse around vermin because it offers a material-environmental reading of birds as beings rather than symbols. Caroline Hovanec (2025) claims that some scholars have defined vermin as animal out of place. She argues that pigeons are a curious case, because they have not been considered as vermin until the twentieth century.

The sociologist Colin Jerolmack argues that pigeons became vermin in the twentieth century because they posed a problem not for public health, but for public space. They became matter out of place in “the orderly, sanitary modern city.” Their ubiquity and visibility, he claims, threatened a modern spatial regime that wanted to rigorously separate humans and animals, increasingly regarding the latter as unclean. (Hovanec 2025: 58)

There is evidence in *The Buried Giant* to suggest that Axl considers the dark birds at the monastery to be ‘out of place’ and ‘unclean’. As already mentioned earlier, for example, he feels the need to protect Beatrice from their ‘foul’ feathers, which may be connected to his subconscious desire to protect her from the disease or the pain he knows her to have. This example reflects his belief that the birds are somehow related to disease, and it also reflects the idea that was mentioned by Hovanec, which suggests that “it is when animals transgress their designated spaces that they

become vermin in need of eradication. And feral pigeons do just that when they live, eat, and shit in city squares and on apartment balconies reserved for humans. (Hovanec 2025: 58)” Axl only expresses discomfort around the birds at the monastery, because they are not supposed to break into the space meant for humans. This is why his attitude towards the songbirds outside of the warren and in the woods was not as hostile. Another great example to support that idea comes later when Axl and Beatrice are eating at the monastery:

Meanwhile, above their heads, the birds had been criss-crossing the underside of the roof, their feathers occasionally drifting down to blemish the surface of the milk. Axl had been tempted to chase off these birds, but had refrained in case the monks regarded them with affection. (Ishiguro 2021: 147–148)

Milk is often considered a symbol of purity, so the feathers which ‘blemish’ the surface of the milk must be the antithesis of purity. In other words, the birds can be seen as polluting the seemingly peaceful monastery. I suggested earlier that the birds serve the purpose of foreshadowing. I would argue that the presence of these birds lifts the veil from the illusion that the monks are virtuous and well-intentioned, when in fact, they are willing to let Axl, Beatrice and Edwin die while pretending to help them. The actions of monk Erasmus further prove that the birds only highlight the questionable behaviour of the monks in general. Right after the above-mentioned passage where Axl ponders whether the birds are regarded with affection by the monks, Erasmus ‘bursts into the room’ and shouts at the birds, trying to throw stones at them. This is the first instance where the façade of a peaceful monastery starts to crumble. It all culminates in a scene where Axl, Beatrice and Edwin are led to a tunnel in which a beast is hiding. Gawain, who knows about the monks’ evil plan and waits for them in the tunnel, explains to them that

The monks wouldn’t have sent you down here if they didn’t mean you to meet the beast. It’s always their way. As men of Christ, it’s beyond them to use a sword or even poison. So they send down here those they wish dead, and in a day or two, they’ll have forgotten they ever did so. Oh yes, that’s their way, especially the abbot’s. By Sunday he may even have convinced himself he saved you from those soldiers. And the work of whatever prowls this tunnel, should it cross his mind, he’ll disown, or even call God’s will. (Ishiguro 2021: 188)

The ominous atmosphere that the presence of the dark birds creates, might therefore hint at the dark past of the monastery, and the evil intentions of the monks.

### **2.3 Three ghost-women**

As the previous discussion indicated, birds can be connected to religious themes in the novel. The dark birds at the monastery were perceived by some of the monks as evil, and by others as possibly a sign from God. In the following discussion about the appearance of the three ghost-women in the novel, I will return to similar themes as discussed earlier, regarding doubts about one's faith and Beatrice's illness. I will elaborate on the points made by Anni Shen and look deeper into the meaning of birds and their relation to religious themes, as well as the bird-women's transition as symbolism for death.

To understand the full implications of the ghost-women's appearance in the novel, I examine more closely these instances where they appear. Shen sees the ghosts as a "pagan spiritual force that is at odds with Christian belief (2021a: 209)". Interestingly, when Beatrice first encounters the so-called 'ghost woman', she condemns the villagers who warned her against the strange woman, believing her to be a demon:

When I was their age, I'm sure it was the old ones were full of fear and foolish beliefs, reckoning every stone cursed and each stray cat an evil spirit. But now I'm grown old myself, what do I find but it's the young are riddled with beliefs like they never heard the Lord's promise to walk beside us at all times. Look at that poor stranger, see her yourself, exhausted and solitary, and she's wandered the forest and fields for four days, village after village commanding her to travel on. And it's Christian country she's walked across, but taken for a demon or maybe a leper though her skin bears no mark of it. (Ishiguro 2021: 17)

It is important that Beatrice mentions "the Lord's promise", indicating that nothing bad could happen to her because she believes in God's protection. In a novel where ogres are considered everyday hazards, it is strange that Beatrice discards the villagers' warnings as mere superstition. It raises the question of what fantasy elements are considered perfectly acceptable in the world of this novel, and what is considered superstitious in their eyes? This passage is a great example of

how the couple's journey is not simply one that puts their love for one another to test, but also their beliefs. In a later chapter, Beatrice and Axl go to a Saxon village and meet Ivor, who tells them about a theory explaining the cause of the collective amnesia. He suggests that perhaps it is God who has forgotten about their pasts, and "if a thing is not in God's mind, then what chance of it remaining in those of mortal men? (Ishiguro 2021: 73)" Beatrice takes this idea further, suggesting that perhaps God is ashamed of something and therefore wants to forget about their pasts. When compared to her earlier statement that God will always walk beside them, this thought shows that her beliefs are changing. I will return to the implication of this segment in a moment, but first, I need to mention the ghost-women's relevance.

Shen (2021a) refers to the appearance of three ghost women in the novel who, she argues, are the same woman. Interestingly, they are all described in terms of their resemblance to birds, which makes these encounters an object of interest for this analysis. It is appropriate to mention that in addition to Shen's claim that the three women who appear in separate chapters in the novel are all versions of the same female ghost, she also argues that the ghost woman is, in fact, Beatrice. This is supported by the fact that the ghost-woman's appearance resembles Beatrice. Coming back to my earlier discussion about God and forgetting, I would argue that the ghost-women and their transition reflect how Beatrice is gradually coming to question her Christian faith. Earlier, I described the scene where Axl is unable to sleep, partially because he is disturbed by the birds. I would argue that since darkness is perceived by the characters as something dangerous, and potentially evil, the dark birds at the monastery – a Christian place – could stand for paganism. One of the monks even calls the birds 'agents of the Devil'. Considering the way these dark birds are described; it could be examined further what the implications of Beatrice also being described

as resembling a thin sparrow could be. Another possibility is that the birds at the monastery stand for death, which will become more apparent with the following analysis about the ghost-women.

The ghost-women become more haunting and less human-like with each encounter, therefore providing another example of birds standing for transition of some sort. Beatrice's and Axl's first encounter with the 'ghost woman' also happens in the first chapter. Since she is described from Axl's perspective, and Axl only sees her from afar, it is her unusual garment that is given more attention, rather than her other features:

From a distance, at least, her cloak appeared to be made of many separate pieces of cloth stitched together, and it was now flapping in the wind, giving its owner the appearance of a great bird about to take flight. Beside her, Beatrice – still on her feet, though with head lowered towards her companion – appeared slight and vulnerable. (Ishiguro 2021: 16)

Shen (2021a: 223) calls attention to the fact that the first encounter with the ghost woman takes place at a mountain, which, according to Japanese folklore, is a place where evil spirits reside. It is also worth pointing out that Beatrice is described as 'vulnerable' when compared to the stranger, which could be seen as a case of foreshadowing when considering the ending of the novel. The encounters with ghost-women, which get progressively more threatening, symbolize transition in the sense that as the story progresses, Axl and Beatrice get closer and closer to uncovering the truth about their past, and simultaneously Beatrice gets closer to her impending death. This is especially apparent when comparing the first and last encounter with the ghost-woman. In the first chapter, it is subtly noted that Beatrice looks vulnerable, and although there is a sense of threat in the appearance of the ghost-woman, she is not as ominous in her appearance or her actions as she becomes in the two following encounters.

It is useful to examine how the bird-women are described at various points in the novel to understand the gradual change in their appearance. To provide a contrast to the previous passage, the second encounter of the bird-woman is described as follows:

Seated on a piece of fallen masonry was a small, bird-like old woman – older than Axl and Beatrice – in dark cloak, the hood pushed back enough to reveal her leathery features. Her eyes were sunk deep so that you could hardly see them. The curve of her back was not quite touching the wall behind her. Something stirred on her lap and Axl saw it was a rabbit, held tightly in her bony hands (Ishiguro 2021: 38).

Compared to the first encounter, this passage provides a more detailed description of the appearance of the woman. For example, her features are described as ‘leathery’, and her eyes are small. These features could point to her old age, but they could also reinforce the resemblance to a bird. Later in the same chapter, it is described how

[The woman] was pulling back the rabbit’s ears, as the animal struggled to free itself, her claw-like hand kept it firmly in its grasp. Then, as Axl watched, the old woman produced in her other hand a large rusted knife and placed it against the creature’s throat. (Ishiguro 2021: 40)

This passage further emphasises the bird-like features of the woman, with her hands described as ‘claw-like’. Many of the elements that are used to describe the woman in the second encounter, such as the dark cloak, a rabbit, or a rusty knife, also make an appearance in the last encounter.

In the last encounter, the ghost-woman is described as follows:

The bow end was bathed in orange light and it took him a moment to see that the pile of rags heaped there on the boards was in fact an elderly woman. The unusual nature of her garment – a patchwork of numerous small dark rags – and the sooty grime smeared over her face had momentarily deceived him. (Ishiguro 2021: 260)

Although there is no direct mention of birds, it is clear that this is the same woman that they encountered before because of the way her garments are described, as well as many other details. The above passage describes how initially, Axl mistakes her to be a pile of rags, which indicates that there is an almost inhuman quality to her appearance.

The last encounter, which Shen (2021a) has called ‘the water scene’, is described by her as follows:

Axl sees the black dots covering the old woman’s coat turn into pixies. Following this scene, the old woman, rabbits, and pixies—things with visual and physical differences—gradually become one in sound and spirit. Their bodies seem to be vessels for the expression of the same speaking voice: the voice of death. (Shen 2021a: 219)

Shen seems to argue that the last stage of the ghost-women's transition is becoming the personification of death itself. If we were to believe that the woman has completed her transition and is now Death personified, then – because earlier the same woman is described as ‘bird-like’, and her hands are described as ‘claw-like’ – it can be said that Death is likened to a great dark-feathered bird. It is important to mention that in chapter seventeen, which is the last chapter of the novel, the boatman describes Beatrice as “but a thin sparrow (Ishiguro 2021: 345)” which reinforces the idea that the three ghost-women are, in fact, Beatrice. Shen points out that in ancient Greek art, black sparrows functioned similarly to the ferryman Charon. They were considered agents of Hades, who were tasked with leading the dead across the river Styx. (Shen 2021a: 218) Similarly, the ghost-women lead Beatrice closer to the ferryman.

Once again, connections could be drawn between these scenes and the so-called memory spaces, which reinforce their supernatural nature. It could even be said that the scenes get progressively more dream-like. The transition of the ghost-women reflects how Beatrice gets closer to her death, until she is also described as resembling a bird – a thin sparrow. Shen's comment about the birds being used as “the incarnation of something eerie that foreshadows the departure (death) of the wife (Shen 2022b: 434)” indicates the same, especially since the ghost-women are likened to *dark* birds and it is precisely the dark colour that seems to associate with negative things in the novel. For example, the feathers of dark birds at the monastery associate with Beatrice's illness, and elsewhere in the novel, crows (who are also dark-feathered birds) are associated with death. What is more, as I pointed out earlier, Beatrice is described at the end of the novel as a thin sparrow. This comparison is used to demonstrate her frailty and foreshadow her death.

## 2.4 Wren-eagle and Environmental Concerns

While I have thus far predominantly focused on birds' possible symbolism related to history and memory, I will now focus on environmental concerns related to bird-imagery. Alexander Sloots (2020) draws parallels between Ishiguro's novel and Rachel Carson's ecocritical work *Silent Spring* (1962). It is worth to note here that Ishiguro as a contemporary writer may have been influenced by Rachel Carson's work but in that case the pollution in the form of the mist is used in *The Buried Giant* in a figurative sense, since the setting of the novel is pre-modern. The mist can be interpreted in many ways – for example, as a physical representation of the memory loss that the characters experience. However, Sloots argues that the dragon Querig's amnesiac breath could be seen as environmental pollution and highlights the similarities between how the pollution and its effects are described in *The Buried Giant* and *Silent Spring*. For example, he points out that in both writings the pollution is a result of human activity and more specifically a consequence of humanity's attempt to conquer or control nature. What is of particular interest to my analysis is his mention of animal hybrids in *The Buried Giant*, who he argues may be suffering from genetic mutation due to environmental pollution. Sloots points out that although the causes of the pollution are different in these works – in *Silent Spring*, it stems from the use of pesticides, in *The Buried Giant* it is the spell that Merlin has put on Querig – they have similar symptoms. He points out that “[s]ome animals in *The Buried Giant* have changed their behavioral patterns, which indicates a stressed ecosystem (Sloots 2020: 6).” He mentions that new animals, such as wren-eagles, appear in the story while wolves are said to have vanished. I would specify that it is made clear in the novel that the disappearance of wolves is caused by the emergence of wren-eagles: “Among many powers attributed to the wren-eagle was the ability to frighten away wolves, and elsewhere in the land, it was said, wolves had vanished altogether on account of these birds. (Ishiguro 2021: 11)”

Sloots argues that the animal hybrids in the novel can be the result of Querig's mist. The arguments made by Sloots indicate that the animals in *The Buried Giant* appear not only as something symbolic but also material.

Wren-eagles reflect how the environment has been affected by the mist in the story world. Beyond the textual world, the wren-eagles' mutation signifies the ecological crises unfolding in Ishiguro's and our lived world. Wan Chuan Kao (2021) provides an alternative and perhaps more nuanced view of Querig's mist, arguing that the dragon's lungs are used as a biopolitical weapon in an act of atmoterrorism by King Arthur and Merlin. In *The Buried Giant*, King Arthur ordered that Merlin put a spell on Querig because of which she would produce the amnesiac mist that makes people forget about the atrocities of war. Therefore, King Arthur attacks the breathing function of human beings, which can be seen as atmoterrorism. Kao's article reinforces that the 'pollution' is man-made and serves the needs of King Arthur. Kao also points out that "to both Arthur and Gawain, the dragon's miasma is a necessary evil for the maintenance of the racial utopia [or racial harmony between the Britons and the Saxons] (Kao 2021: 16)." Therefore, the wren-eagle, which is one of several animal hybrids described in *The Buried Giant*, serves as a reminder of the consequences of King Arthur's actions. In other words, birds can be associated with the theme of human versus nature in the novel, further proving that the appearance of birds in the novel can be both symbolic and material.

Accordingly, I will examine more closely the possible meanings of the wren-eagle since I believe the wren-eagle to have connections to Irish folklore. I argue that the mention of a wren-eagle hides deeper implications about the theme of human versus nature. The mention of a wren-eagle appears in the first chapter, and it comes from the two shepherds who claim they saw one:

"There was no mistake, he said, it had been a wren-eagle. Word quickly went around the warren and soon a crowd gathered around the fire to listen to the shepherds. Even Axl had hurried to join them, for the appearance of a wren-eagle in their country was news indeed. Among the many powers attributed to the

wren-eagle was the ability to frighten away wolves, and elsewhere in the land, it was said, wolves had vanished altogether on account of these birds. (Ishiguro 2021: 11)”

It is noteworthy that the wren-eagle is described as powerful and mysterious. It is also indicated that seeing a wren-eagle is rare, since none of the other villagers have seen one, and they are sceptical about the shepherds’ claims of having seen one, as exemplified by the following quote: “At first the shepherds were questioned eagerly and made to repeat their story over and over, then steadily a scepticism began to spread among the listeners. There had been many similar claims, someone pointed out, and each time they had proved unfounded. (Ishiguro 2021: 11)” As I have mentioned before, the wren-eagle serves as a distraction and signifies the transition from remembering to forgetting. Additionally, the wren-eagle is also an animal hybrid and reflects the environmental state of the world in *The Buried Giant*. I argue that it is no coincidence that Ishiguro has chosen these two species – wren and eagle – to create the hybrid.

Sylvie Muller (1996) has written about the different wren tales and the wren ritual belonging to Irish tradition. She points out that the wren has been regarded as king of all birds, not only in Ireland but also in the rest of Europe. She mentions three main types of tales written about the wren. Interestingly, there exists at least some variation of all of them, where an eagle is also mentioned; in some cases, the eagle even plays an integral part in the story. This connection further reinforces that the wren-eagle being mentioned in *The Buried Giant* is not coincidental and might have meaningful relations to the Irish and European wren tales.

According to Muller, the most popular wren-tale is *The Election of the Bird-King*. In this tale, all birds compete against each other to determine who gets crowned king. The title would go to the bird who is able to fly highest. Unknown to the eagle, the wren hides under its wing and, as is thus able to fly higher than the eagle. (Muller 1996: 136) Muller also points out that in many Irish versions, the wren must pay for the title, being “either hit by the eagle, or placed under a *geis*

or taboo by it, in consequence of which it can never fly higher than a bush. (Muller 1996: 136)” Muller then points out that the two other wren-tales can also be separated into two groups based on whether the wren pays a debt of some sort or is able to avoid it (Muller 1996: 137). The second wren-tale is called *The War between the Birds and the Quadrupeds*, which also has multiple variations, but the main idea is that there is a war between the mice and the birds. In most versions, the mouse is declared the winner, resulting in all birds being killed except for the eagle. In some versions, the king’s son sides with the birds and saves the eagle. Only two versions of this tale end with the birds winning.

Similarly to the previous two tales, the third one is also about the wren paying a debt. The main idea of the tale is that the ‘lender’ needs to identify the wren father who is either punished or able to trick the ‘lender.’ Muller describes how in the first redaction, “the fox recognizes the wren-father and forces him to repay his debt with his own flesh i.e. the wren is eaten by the fox”, in another version, the lender tricks the wren-father to reveal his identity, and in a third version the wren-father hides among his children and is able to avoid paying debt (Muller 1996: 139).

It is evident that the theme of having to pay a debt of some sort, or trying to avoid it, can be found in almost all these wren-tales. Interestingly, the first version of this wren-tale, where the wren pays his debt with his flesh, evokes the scene in the novel where some of the monks let the mountain birds pick at their flesh. It could be said that this is the monks’ way of paying a debt to nature for their part in King Arthur’s plan. Another connection could be made with Greek mythology, where Prometheus is condemned by Zeus to perpetual torture for his actions. This is also mentioned by Sloots (2020), who argues that “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 (Sloots 2020: 8).” Prometheus was driven by the desire to

better the life of humans, which is similar to King Arthur's motives. What makes the myth of Prometheus relevant here is the punishment he received. Different variations of the same myth exist, but according to one of them, Prometheus shaped men and stole fire from the wheels of the Sun's chariot, which he brought to mankind. The gods sent fever and disease to mankind as a punishment, and Prometheus was chained to a mountain where his heart was to be devoured by an eagle. (Raggio 1958: 51) That parallels to that story exist in *The Buried Giant* is apparent. In addition to the amnesiac quality of the mist, it is also said to cause disease and be dangerous to one's health. Additionally, it appears that animal hybrids are also a side effect of the mist. These effects of the mist might not have been intended by Arthur or Merlin, and they can therefore be seen as punishment for 'playing god.' Another aspect to consider is the fact that Prometheus is said to have 'formed mankind.' In some way, it could also be said that Arthur, through his proxy – Merlin – shaped new life forms – hybrids, which gives another dimension to the comparisons with Prometheus.

Coming back to the meaning of the wren, Muller (1996) describes the wren rituals, which included the hunting of the wren on Christmas Day and killing it on the following day by men and boys referred to as 'wren boys' in English. The purpose of these rituals was most likely to "ensure fertility and prosperity for the community for the coming year (Muller 1996: 144)." The wren boys were usually bachelors, and they wore disguises, for example, a mask or a straw hat. The wren boys went from house to house, showing the dead wren to members of the community. At the end of the day, the wren was to be buried in a coffin. (Muller 1996: 142–143)

Muller has provided a theory about what the wren might represent in these rituals. She points out that wren's nest resembles a house or a castle, and the bird is buried like a human after the ritual. (Muller 1996: 145) She also highlights that in one Welsh song it is stated that 'Man is a

little wren’ which, in her opinion, “articulates the old idea that Man can be compared to a bird (Muller 1996: 146).” The fact that wren is an ‘ineffectual flyer’ that spends more of its time on the ground, rather than flying, seems to support that idea. Muller goes on to argue that the wren also resembles humans because it used the strength of the eagle to get the royal title, much like a man could “manipulate and deploy powers superior to him for his own benefit – for example, when he uses his knowledge to control the forces of Nature, becoming its king /.../ (Muller 1996: 146).” If the wren stands for Man, then the wren boys; however, seem to stand for Nature, Muller argues.

We can take it, therefore, that all the animals mentioned in the tales – the eagle, the mouse, the fox and the female birds – also stand for Nature, thus making sense of the fact that the eagle takes on the role of a druid when it places the wren under a *geis*: while the king represents Man, the druid represents Nature and also supernatural forces. In other words, the wren ritual may be interpreted as enacting the death of Man killed by Nature, or the sacrifice of a man to, and by, Nature /.../ If the wren stands for Man, and the other animals stand for Nature, the wren has to die in order to pay the debt of Nature, to use a recognised expression for dying. (Muller 1996: 147-149)

If the wren stands for Man and the eagle stands for Nature, then the implications of the hybrid wren-eagle in *The Buried Giant* are complicated. The appearance of the wren-eagle could be seen as a sign that Men will soon have to pay for the harm they have caused to Nature. Much like in one of the tales where the wren won the royal title by using the eagle’s strength, King Arthur used Querig’s body and Merlin’s magic to accomplish illusory peace at a cost – both people and nature suffered as a result. The wren-eagle is a reminder that our actions have consequences. Additionally, reading the eagle as having connections to the myth of Prometheus further reinforces the idea that the wren-eagle might stand for punishment for mankind for beginning to exploit nature. As the previous analysis suggests, Ishiguro seems to use the wren-eagle as a symbol that points to very material, environmental concerns related to various species.

Although birds often appear as symbols for something – for example death or pollution or change – these symbols also significantly refer to material-environmental concern that different beings face in Ishiguro’s story and in the contemporary readers’ worlds. It appears from the

previous discussion that Ishiguro's use of myths – for instance, allusions to Prometheus or the associations with the wren tales – serve as a warning against selfish and thoughtless treatment of nature.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to explore Ishiguro's depiction of birds and their possible symbolic meanings in relation to memory studies and ecocritical theory. The literature review gave an overview of previous research, which was mainly focused on the themes of memory in *The Buried Giant*, or how various environment-related aspects were handled in the novel. There were not many articles, however, that would have explored the significance of birds in the novel.

I used Yugin Teo's term 'memory spaces' which are places where past and present or dream world and real-world merge. I made an observation that birds happen to appear in the story where memory spaces occur, and I argued that birds may symbolise transition or liminality (being in two different states simultaneously). I brought examples from the beginning of the novel where birds seemed to signify the transition from remembering to forgetting. I also pointed out the deceptiveness of songbirds, since they appear to be harmless and provide false sense of security to the characters. There is a noticeable difference between how the songbirds and the dark birds at the monastery are described. The birds themselves may not be more threatening at the monastery, but Axl still perceives them that way because they are not supposed to occupy the space meant for humans. The difference between how the songbirds and dark-feathered birds at the monastery are described was analysed eco-critically, in which case, the biases of Axl (and humans, in general) against these birds based on their physical attributes, their species, or the inconvenience they put humans into, inform his perception of the birds.

The three ghost-women also reinforce the idea that birds stand for transition, since the bird-women are really one woman who gradually becomes less and less human, since she is supposed to represent Beatrice's death. Beatrice herself is also described as increasingly frailer as the story progresses. I also argued that Beatrice's transition into a dark bird (or resembling one) could stand

for questioning her faith, since it is not clear to the monks whether the birds at the monastery are agents of the devil (in which case they could stand for paganism) or agents of God (Christianity).

Finally, I analysed the significance of the wren-eagle. Sloots argued that the wren-eagle is an animal hybrid, born as a result of Querig's mist. I argued that the wren-eagle has connections to the Irish wren-tales and wren rituals. According to Sylvie Muller (1996), the wren may stand for Man in the wren rituals. If that interpretation could also be applied to *The Buried Giant*, then the wren-eagle could symbolise the punishment that the mankind will face for their poor treatment of nature. The punishment symbolism is reinforced by the connections between *The Buried Giant* and the myth of Prometheus.

There are still many possibilities of future research in terms of bird symbolism in *The Buried Giant*, and possibilities for ecocritical analysis. For example, it could be further investigated whether Edwin's character has more connections to birds or not. Edwin was bitten by a baby dragon, and the dragon was described in the novel as resembling a mixture of a plucked chicken and a serpent. Therefore, the dragon could also be interpreted as a hybrid animal. What is more, it could be argued that the transition of Edwin makes him a hybrid of sorts as well. Another possibility for future research would be to compare the environmental and religious aspects in *The Buried Giant* and *Klara and the Sun*. These are only a few examples of topics that could be explored in the future.

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# RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Maria Sokk**

**Analysis of Birds in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant***

**Lindude analüüs Kazuo Ishiguro romaanis "Maetud hiiglane"**

Bakalaureusetöö

Lehekülgede arv: 44

Annotatsioon:

Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on uurida lindude materiaalsel ja sümbolistlikku kujutamiseviisi Kazuo Ishiguro romaanis "Maetud hiiglane" (2015), toetudes kriitikutele, kes tegelevad ökokriitilise teooriaga ning mälu-uuringutega. Varasem kirjandus pole eriliselt suurt tähelepanu pööranud loomade või lindude kujutamisele romaanis, mistõttu käesolevas töös keskendutakse sügavamalt lindude kujutamiseviisile ning sümboolikale.

Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatus, kirjanduse ülevaade, empiiriline analüüs ning kokkuvõte. Sissejuhatus annab ülevaate "Maetud hiiglane" süžeest ning bakalaureusetöö ülesehitusest. Esimene peatükk tutvustab varasemat kirjandust, milles on peamiselt käsitletud mälu ning keskkonna teemasid romaanis "Maetud hiiglane". Lõputöö teise osas analüüsin konkreetseid tekstinäiteid romaanist, kus linnud esinevad.

Empiirilise analüüsi osa on jaotatud neljaks alapeatükiks. Esimeses alapeatükis väidan, et linnud võivad sümboliseerida üleminekut ühest olekust teise. Selleks kasutan Yugin Teo terminit 'mäluruumid', mis on kohad, kus minevik ja olevik või unenägude maailm ja pärismaailm ühinevad. Teises alapeatükis analüüsin kloostri pesitsevate lindude kujutamiseviisi võrreldes laululindudega ning nende sümboolset tähendust. Kolmandas alapeatükis käsitlen kolme kummitusnaise esinemist romaanis toetudes Anni Sheni artiklile. Neljandas alapeatükis analüüsin romaanis esineva käblik-kotka sümboolset tähendust seoses keskkonna temaatikaga. Toetun Alexander Slootsi tööle, milles käsitletakse "Maetud hiiglast" ökokriitilisest vaatepunktist, ning Sylvie Mullerile.

Uurimuse tulemusena selgub, et Ishiguro romaanis esinevatel lindudel on nii materiaalne kui ka sümboolne väärtus.

Märksõnad: inglise kirjandus, Kazuo Ishiguro, "Maetud hiiglane", fantaasiakirjandus

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