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PARODY OF CHIVALRIC ROMANCE IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S THE BURIED GIANT

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ABSTRACT

Based on the 14th century chivalric romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Buried Giant* narrates a fantasy story showing the conflict and integration between Briton and Saxon nations. This paper attempts to analyze the parody in this novel and explore the solution to the political dilemma between "truth and peace" through the dialogue between the two works.

Key words: *The Buried Giant*; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; parody; Kazuo Ishiguro

1. Introduction

The Buried Giant is a fantasy novel published in 2015. The book was nominated for the 2016 World Fantasy Award for best novel, and the 2016 Mythopoeic Award for Adult Literature. It was also placed sixth in the 2016 Locus Award for Best Fantasy Novel. The Guardian's evaluation of the book is that "It is a profound examination of memory and guilt, of the way we recall past trauma en masse" (Preston 7).

The novel follows an elderly Briton couple, Axl and Beatrice, living in a fictional post-Arthurian England in which no one is able to retain long-term memories. After dimly recalling that they might have had a son years earlier, the couple decided to travel to a neighbouring village to seek him out. On the way, they met Gawain the knight and Wistan the Saxon. The dragon they wanted to kill could spew a mist that could make people lose their memory. During the journey, people's memories began to recover due to the increasing altitude and thinning mist. It turns out that the so-called situation of harmonious coexistence between the two nations left by King Arthur is a complete illusion. The real situation is that the Britons covered up the bloody fact of killing the Saxons and thus gained the dominion. The dragon slayers, represented by Wistan, want to kill the dragon to make the truth come to the surface, while the dragon protectors, represented by Gawain, want the mist to continue and the truth to be covered up. Therefore, the people disagreed on the issue of dragon slaughter, and the two factions fought again.

Because of its special theme and unique writing technique, this work has attracted the interest of many critics and researchers since it was published. And it has been studied from a broader perspective, such as the traumatic memory, narrative art, and identity issues. However, few critics explore this work from the perspective of parody.

Parody, as one of the important features of the postmodern literature, is a kind of imitation. The definition and discussion of parody can be traced back to ancient Greece, and the important turning point has taken place since Russian formalism and Bakhtin. Bakhtin thinks that “any parody is a mixture of dialogization, in which different languages and styles are actively reflecting each other” (Bakhtin 257). In his view, parody is the imitation of one kind of discourse to another. Later, Hutcheon and Dentith further expanded the scope. Hutcheon thought parody was “imitation with a critical ironic distance” (37), while Dentith defined parody as “a cultural practice which makes a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (37). So far, parody covers the imitation of all cultural products and practices. According to Bakhtin’s research and his definition of parody, we can find that the essential feature of parody is its inherent dialogism, that is, the irreconcilable nature of the two voices contained in a parody.

In *The Buried Giant*, Kazuo Ishiguro does not simply imitate the classical literary work, but discusses the general situation of mankind by rewriting the well-known story. In an interview, Kazuo Ishiguro talked about the reasons for choosing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as the object of parody. “I wanted to put it in some setting where people wouldn’t get too literal about it, where they wouldn’t think, oh, he’s written a book about the disintegration of Yugoslavia or the Middle East” (Alter 19). Therefore, when he accidentally read about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he thought that “this kind of barren, weird England, with no civilization, that could be quite interesting” (Alter 19). After that, he began to study England in the 6th century, and how the Anglo-Saxons who settled in England at that time lived. He said: “To my delight, I discovered nobody knows what the hell was going on ... It’s a blank period of British history” (Alter 19). In this context, the author can use his imagination and add various elements to imitate and create a new work based on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

This paper will analyze the parody of the roles and political significance of Sir Gawain, King Arthur and the Green Knight in the novel, exploring what the country and people should choose when facing the dilemma about the truth and peace.

2. Parody in The Buried Giant

On the basis of the 14th century English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* reproduces its theme and describes the national conflict and integration in the post-Arthurian era. Therefore, this paper explores the parodic relationship between the novel and the chivalric romance to help readers understand the profound significance of Kazuo Ishiguro’s work.

2.1 Parody of King Arthur

Whether in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or in other classic legends, King Arthur is always a king with political wisdom and noble moral character. In the romance, the narrator once said that he was charming and cheerful, as carefree as a child. He loved the hectic life and never slept. It was rare for him to rest on a chair. He had a passionate and active brain. When he stood among many knights, he was extraordinarily tall, determined and strong. At the same time, he was also a wise king who ruled the country well. When the Green Knight first arrived at King Arthur’s Palace, he said to King Arthur,

But as your reputation, royal sir, is raised up so high,
And your castle and cavaliers are accounted the best,
The mightiest of mail-clad men in mounted fighting,
The most warlike, the worthiest the world has bred,
Most valiant to vie with in virile contests,
And as chivalry is shown here, so I am assured,
At this time, I tell you, that has attracted me here. (26)

From the above description, it is easy to be found that King Arthur's rule brought prosperity to England and he was loved by the people. And this peaceful and prosperous scene is the result of King Arthur's wise rule. However, King Arthur, who used to be vigorous and wise in governing the country, turned into a dead king who broke his promise and devoted himself to maintaining the false peace in *The Buried Giant*. Previously, King Arthur had promulgated *The Law of the Innocents* to protect the Saxon people, and Axl, as a Knight of Peace who implemented this law, was also respected and loved by local people.

However, in order to keep himself and the Britons in a dominant position, King Arthur sent soldiers to massacre the Saxons. Afterwards, he also instructed Merlin, the wizard, to cast spells on the she-dragon Querig, so that she could breathe out the mist that caused amnesia, in an attempt to erase this bloody history. Therefore, in the decades when the dragon survived, the Britons and the Saxons gradually forgot the national hatred and maintained the apparent peace. However, such a false peace would eventually be broken, because Querig's body was getting weaker and weaker, and the mist that had made people lose their memories would eventually disappear. Even if Wistan and others did not decide to slaughter the dragon, the false peace maintained by King Arthur with cruel means would end. It is paradoxical that the ruling means to bring peace to the country is killing and forced forgetting. Therefore, the critical effect of parody is also obvious.

The parody of King Arthur's image breaks the stereotype given by a traditional chivalric romance. In this process, the author also reveals the truth of the wars for readers. Relying on forgetting and killing to maintain peace and covering up ethnic conflicts will only destroy peace and lead to conflicts again.

2.2 Parody of Sir Gawain

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Sir Gawain is obviously the most important knight around King Arthur. The romance describes Sir Gawain as a "good and prestigious knight" (12). Like other romances about Sir Gawain, this romance does not emphasize Sir Gawain's superb martial arts, but his honesty and integrity. He is "a man of troth most true, And knightly name annealed" (64). Then, the romance praises Sir Gawain's five virtues, including his belief in Christ, his strict compliance with Christian requirements in words and deeds, and his "Liberality and Lovingkindness leading the rest; Then his Continenace and Courtesy, which were never corrupted; And Piety, the surpassing virtue" (64).

The image of Sir Gawain depicted in the poem has a certain continuation in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, and at the same time it has undergone great changes. Like Sir Gawain described in the poem, the most important quality of Sir Gawain in this novel is his loyalty. In the novel, Gawain once threatened: "Like all who stood with Arthur, sir, I've faced beelzebubs and monsters as well as the darkest intents of men, and always upheld my great king's example even in the midst of ferocious conflict" (207).

For Gawain, no matter what King Arthur did, he would always be a great king. No matter what tasks the king would give him, he was supposed to complete them. On the surface, this is a praiseworthy act of loyalty, but in fact it is a kind of "foolish loyalty" which lacks the rational thinking. Such reckless loyalty led to a series of vicious chain reactions. As one of the Knights of the Round Table, Gawain did not approve of King Arthur's massacre of the Saxons, but he always firmly maintained the image of King Arthur and faithfully fulfilled his promise of guarding the dragon. When the Saxons tried to wage war again for justice and truth, Gawain was unable to stop the Saxon soldier, Wistan. For Gawain, the massacre and the cover-up of the facts were unacceptable, but he did not want to destroy the existing peace. In the face of such a tangled situation, he did not know what kind of decision could satisfy everyone. In the end, Gawain chose to fight till death to pledge his loyalty to the king, trying to maintain this peace supported by oblivion in this way.

It can be seen that Sir Gawain in the romance defends truth and glory, while Sir Gawain in the novel defends mendacious peace and lies. The sharp contrast of Sir Gawain's image in the two works reflects Ishiguro's thinking on solving the current political dilemma and national historical problems. False facts cannot be accepted by the people, but the current peace should not be destroyed either.

2.3 Parody of the Green Knight

In the romance, the green knight is a sacred envoy of God, although he looks strange as “half a giant on earth” (14). The appearance of this giant is actually a test to Sir Gawain and King Arthur to verify their courage and wisdom. When the green knight appeared, he held “a holly cluster in one hand, holly; that is greenest when groves are gaunt and bare” (21). According to the annotation, the holly cluster is an evergreen shrub, symbolizing Christmas and immortal Jesus, which means the green knight with the holly cluster is immortal. According to the Christian doctrine, human beings are guilty and doomed to die out, so the immortality of the green knight could show that he is the ideal representative of the chivalry.

The real purpose of the green knight breaking into the palace to challenge is not to kill people, or, as Stone said, to “lure people to death” (117), but to make pleasure-addicted lords and knights aware of their complacency, and to test the courage and loyalty of the knights. His ultimate goal is a noble one, to make people realize their imperfections so that they can constantly improve themselves. This also proves that the green knight is a knight who spreads the truth and punishes people for their moral deficiency.

In the novel, the green knight becomes the forgotten and buried history. Although the novel does not have the role of the green knight like Arthur and Gawain, Ishiguro’s parody of this image can still be seen. The title of the novel is the most obvious hint. The same “giant” has a completely different symbolic meaning. The “giant” green knight in the romance is the representative of the chivalry, while the novel is suggesting that the “giant” buried by King Arthur of Briton by means of violating his ideals is the dark history covered by the mist. Facing Axl’s fear of the facts to be revealed, Saxon soldier Wistan said, “How right to fear it, sir ... The giant, once well buried, now stirs. When soon he rises ... our armies will grow larger, Swollen by anger and thirst for vengeance” (Ishiguro 320-21). The giant in the romance brings truth to people, while the giant in the novel brings falsehood and another war.

In the novel, there is no follow-up description of the imminent war caused by the disclosure of the facts, but there are only two kinds of results. One is that England will once again fall into the endless cycle of slaughters after the regime is overthrown; the other is that the Saxons can not only show the real history to people, but also maintain the present peace after knowing the truth. Obviously, the second result is the appropriate solution to this dilemma.

The parody of the green knight in the novel is obscure, but the subversion of its spiritual core is obvious. Ishiguro tries to find a solution to the problem of the collective forgetting of the war history through the dialogue between the two works. Although sometimes, the historical facts are bloodshed and killing, it is also not advisable to wage a war in order to expose the truth and seek justice without considering the lives of most people. No matter what background of the times, it should be the common consciousness of those in power and the people to face up to the national history and cherish the present peace.

3. Conclusion

The Buried Giant parodies the 14th century British chivalric romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and recreates a fantasy story showing the conflict and integration between the Britons and the Saxons. In this novel, Gawain and King Arthur are no longer heroes worthy of worship, but hypocrites who cover up the truth. The green knight is no longer an envoy of the divine, but a hidden fact. The sharp contrast between the characters in the two works makes the chivalric romance dialogue with the contemporary fantasy novel. The previous unitary images are remolded and endowed with more complicated characters and historical background.

Like other parody novels, the significance of this novel depends on its differences and connections with the previous texts. Kazuo Ishiguro’s purpose is not to imitate the genre itself, but to subvert the traditional images through the dialogue between the two works, and to explore the solution to the political dilemma between “truth and peace” in the dialogue. Ishiguro provided inspirations for contemporary people with the help of the ethnic conflicts in the 6th century, and finally came to the conclusion that human beings should think rationally, face up to the national history and cherish the present peace.

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