

Reconceptualizing Object Agency Through Ma (間): Object-oriented Narratological Approach to Kazuo Ishiguro's Select Novels*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.4>

Abstract

*This study integrates Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), which treats all entities including objects as equally significant, and Ma (間), a Japanese concept emphasizing the meaningfulness of gaps and spaces, to analyze how objects function in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* and *Klara and the Sun*. Through this integration the study attempts to reconceptualize how objects are viewed in a narrative. By highlighting the complementary nature of both the concepts, this study evaluates the significance of absences, gaps and hidden meanings that are expressed through the objects in the narrative. This study focuses on the function of various significant objects in both the novels. It also analyses how those objects actively shape the novel and its themes through their placement and interaction with other objects. The analysis reveals that objects shape the narrative in their own right, beyond simply serving human characters, influencing reader interpretation and engagement. Rather than being seen as passive tools or background elements, objects are understood as having the capacity to affect relationships, emotions, and events within a story. This reconceptualization of object agency (ability of objects to influence the narrative) underscores the interconnectedness of all narrative entities and advocates for a non-anthropocentric approach to literary analysis. The study highlights the importance of what is present and what is left unsaid or unseen in a narrative, illustrating how gaps and spaces contribute significantly to the literary ecosystem.*

Keywords: Object Agency, Ma (間), Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), Narrative Dynamics, Interobjectivity

Introduction

In the landscape of contemporary literary analysis, a lot of importance has been given to understanding the psychology of the characters, the narrative structure of the plot and the socio-political context in which the story is set. There is also a growing focus on eco-critical concepts and posthumanist approaches to literary works, which advocates for decentralization of human perspective to include non-human agencies. One such approach is Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), which challenges human-centered thinking by treating humans, animals, objects, and other entities as equally important. This idea, developed and popularized by Graham Harman (2018), has also influenced how literature is analyzed. In her book *Object-Oriented Narratology* (2024), Marie-Laure Ryan supports the “storytelling power of objects” (Ryan, 2024, p.3). She draws on the same core ideas of Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, particularly the belief that objects can exist “independently of human cognition” (Ryan 3). While she acknowledges that “narrative objects are highly dependent on human consciousness

* **Article History:** Full Article Received on 31 May 2025. Peer Review completed on 6 July, Article Accepted on 12 July, 2025/First published: September 2025. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

and agency” (Ryan 210), her theory stresses the need to pay attention to the “narrative importance of objects” (Ryan 61) in shaping how a story is understood.

According to Harman, there are two types of objects: real and sensual. Real objects can “exist on their own right,” while sensual objects rely on human perception and only exist in relation to a real object (56). He explains that everything we can think of—whether “human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional” (p. 10) is considered an object. Object-Oriented Ontology believes that every object has aspects that remain hidden from human understanding. There is always a side to the object that is beyond our full understanding. This idea emphasizes that objects have their own depth and mystery, not just the roles they play for humans. This unknowable side of objects creates a gap between what is known and what the object truly is. This gap highlights that things have their own reality, independent of how humans see or use them.

To address this gap, this study takes an integrated approach combining Object-Oriented Ontology with Japanese concept of *Ma*, (間, pronounced *ma*) which focuses on the spatial dynamics between objects. *Ma* is a concept from Japanese culture that focuses on the spaces between things. *Ma* (間), a “paradigm in Japanese culture” (Pilgrim 276) significantly influences architecture, art, music and literature by affirming “the power of intervals and gaps in time, space, and being” (Pilgrim 276). For example, the silence between two sounds in music, the pause during a conversation, or the empty space between buildings, are not just empty or meaningless. Even though the entire reality of objects is inaccessible, analysing where they are placed and studying their interactions with other objects can offer a more comprehensive view of the object. *Ma* (間) can be defined as the “space between objects” or “empty space” (Reynolds 15). *Ma* emphasizes the role of gaps, pauses and void in establishing how absences can be as important as presence in the construction of meaning. The rationale to incorporate this integrated approach to Ishiguro’s novels stems from his narrative style that makes use of narrative gaps, unsaid emotions and absences (physical and mental). Furthermore, as a Japanese-British writer Ishiguro has been influenced by Japanese movies and landscape (Ishiguro 4), which are reflected in his works and calls for an investigation of *Ma* in his novels. Harman says that paying attention to the gaps that exist (Ryan 176) can reveal not only the “reality of things” (Ryan 176) but also their active role in shaping the meaning of a narrative. Similarly, Wellek also believes that the “world of objects have a status of their own” (Ronen 422) in literature, meaning that objects have their own power or agency and influence the story, no matter how they are described or portrayed in the text. The objectives of this article are to examine the narrative functions (Ryan 31) of the significant objects mentioned in Ishiguro’s two recent novels *The Buried Giant* (2015) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021), and to explore the spaces between the objects and their significance. The impact of such objects on reader engagement is also analyzed in this article. Both the novels have prominent presence of gaps and absences which are often symbolized by the certain objects that are pivotal to narrative development. For instance, in *The Buried Giant* the presence of mist is a metaphor for the absence of memories, similarly the presence of Klara (Artificial Friend) symbolizes the absence of human intimacy. This study aims to demonstrate how integrating Object-Oriented Ontology and *Ma* offers a deeper understanding of Ishiguro’s narrative techniques and the complex interplay between presence and absence that defines his fictional worlds.

Narrative Function of Objects

Narrative function is the role objects play in a story. As Ryan points out “objects make us as much as we make them” (29), meaning objects have inherent autonomy irrespective of whether humans made them or not. Humans tend to notice an object only when it “stops working” for them (Ryan 5), similarly in the select novels the objects are mentioned mostly when the human characters face problems or needs. Objects have always been treated as passive elements, tools

and utilities to serve human needs. Instead of focusing on how an object in a narrative is used to enhance human perception of the plot, this article deals with how the narrative representation of an object can emphasize its agency and the “possibility of objects to function as characters” (Ryan 210). When objects are treated as integral components of a narrative, analysing their role can help in a deeper understanding of the narrative. The narrative representation of objects can take “mimetic, thematic, strategic and structural” (Ryan 23) forms. They can imitate reality (mimetic), symbolize ideas (thematic), affect the plot or characters (strategic), or help shape the story’s structure (structural). Based on these four forms, this section will analyze selected objects from both novels.

The Buried Giant

The Mist (mimetic, thematic, strategic): It is described as a literal fog responsible for collective memory loss of the inhabitants of the Saxon village. It symbolises underlying historical violence and erasure of the past. It strategically drives the plot by creating obstacles and motivation for Axl and Beatrice to go in search of their past.

Querig (mimetic, thematic, strategic): She-dragon (Querig) is described as a fierce monster whose breath is responsible for the mist. It embodies the effort of people in power to maintain peace at the cost of erasing people’s memory. Slaying the dragon becomes the goal of a few characters that drives the plot towards the truth about their memories.

The Boat (thematic, structural): The boat in which Axl and Beatrice travels to the island of souls, reflects the journey towards afterlife and it is used as an allegory in the novel. Thematically it explores the journey between life, death, love and memory. Structurally, it connects the protagonists’ pivotal moment of their revelation of past painful memories.

Axl’s sword (thematic, structural): It stands for his lost valour and pride as a soldier. Structurally occurring as a recurrent motif, it acts as a link between his past and the present self in the absence of any real memories.

Klara and the Sun

Klara (mimetic, thematic, strategic, structural): The novel is narrated from Klara’s perspective, a solar-powered Artificial-Friend. Her learning and understanding of things in the human world reflect a stark contrast to the lacking humanity and empathy among the humans. Strategically, Klara illustrates love and empathy by contradicting Josie’s mother. Her distinct perspective enhances the themes of connection and alienation. Structurally, as the narrator she shapes the narrative structure and helps readers grasp the plot and characters.

The Sun (thematic, strategic): Thematically, it represents Klara’s hope and belief that the sun can heal Josie’s sickness. Strategically, Klara’s dependency on the sun for her own energy as well as her belief in the healing qualities of sun, makes it a catalyst in driving the plot.

The Cootings Machine (thematic, strategic): It is perceived by Klara as the source of pollution which makes the sun unhappy. Even though she tries to destroy it to stop pollution and save Josie, it shows Klara’s limitation as an AI. Strategically, Klara’s drive to destroy the machine drives the plot and explores complex themes such as ethics and consequences of modern technology.

Windows (thematic, structural): Throughout the novel Klara is looking through glass windows symbolising a divide between her world and the human world. As a recurring motif, it shows Klara’s existence on the periphery of human experience.

This analysis shows the pivotal role of objects and their active participation that propels the narrative. Objects can transcend their roles as mere narrative accessories and embody character-like qualities, enhancing the text with complex layers of meanings.

Querig and Klara: Fictional Objects of Use and Misuse

In both novels, the human characters often force their own feelings or ideas onto real objects, diminishing their inherent agency by using and misusing them for their needs. For example, in *The Buried Giant*, initially Querig, the dragon is described as a “great fierceness, hidden in difficult terrain” (Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* 64), with her breath causing the Mist of forgetfulness. Later, it is revealed that Querig was used a tool by King Arthur’s knight Merlin, who enchanted a spell on the dragon’s breath to erase everyone’s memories of the violent war and to establish forced peace. As long as Querig breathes, peace is maintained in the country. Those who seek to slay the dragon are motivated by a desire to regain their lost memories, overlooking the greater harm caused both to the people and to Querig herself. When she is finally about to be killed, she looked nothing like a monster but a “worm-like reptile with sagging folds of skin, mistaken for dead leaves” (Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* 258). Used merely as a tool to manipulate the people, Querig’s agency is stripped away. The qualities attributed to her by the human characters in the novel, reflect their own fears. It also highlights the neglect, exploitation and ethical implications of using such a creature for human interests.

Klara, as an Artificial Friend (AF) is designed to fulfil human’s needs. Even though she can think, feel fear, love and empathy, her feelings are never acknowledged by the people who bought her. Josie’s mother demands Klara to “walk like Josie” (Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* 90) and Mr. Capaldi asserts “we’re not asking you to train the new Josie. We’re asking you to become her” (Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* 174). Klara is always treated as a replacement for human roles. To Josie, Klara substitutes her parents’ care, while to her mother, Klara is her daughter’s replacement in case of her death from the brain enhancement procedure. Klara is always held to the standard of ethical and moral perfection, while constantly being denied her autonomy. One of Josie’s friends even says “Throw her over onto the sofa. She won’t get damaged.” (Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* 68) denying her both physical and emotional integrity. When she is no longer needed, she is put to a slow fade with Josie’s mother stating, she deserves this fate over being cut open to use her as a research item. (Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* 244)

Both Klara and Querig are subjected to human manipulation, stripped of their agency. By examining the qualities attributed to them by human characters, it becomes clear that their real qualities are overshadowed by imposed roles they are expected to perform. This highlights the ethical consequences of using sentient beings merely as tools for human convenience and control.

Interobjective Spaces

According to Object-Oriented Ontology, interobjectivity is defined as the “relation between objects” (Harman 157), emphasizing the ways objects influence each other. Similarly, *Ma* also deals with the relation between objects, but places emphasis on the space that exists between them. So, integrating these two concepts can reveal the spatial and relational dynamics between objects in a narrative. These spaces are also significant as the object present in the novels. For instance, the space between the houses in Saxon village in *The Buried Giant*, encapsulates the fractured relationships and the erased historical narratives that define the novel’s setting. The structure of the novel is similar to the landscape where various fragments are dispersed on a huge mesh, despite their isolation they are connected through a shared history. Another example of an interobjective space occurs when Axl and Beatrice approach Querig’s lair. In this moment, the gap between the characters’ sudden flashes of their past and the sight of the dragon’s weakening body symbolizes the delicate balance between memory and forgetting. The dragon’s decay represents the fading force that has kept painful memories hidden, while the characters’ remembrance of the past reflects the return of these suppressed truths. This space highlights the fragile balance of peace, memory and the tension between the emerging truth of their violent past.

Another instance where “the only living thing visible, aside from the dragon herself, was a solitary hawthorn bush sprouting incongruously through the stone” (Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* 267) is very meaningful. Querig’s dying body and the hawthorn bush are placed in physical proximity, with nothing else alive around them. This space symbolizes the fragile persistence of suppressed and repressed past. Just as the bush surviving in the barren land alongside the dragon, truth, memory and history will persist despite the efforts to suppress them. The manifestation of this idea can be seen when Axl touches the stranger’s sword, he “had felt, almost tangibly, the peculiar mix of comfort, excitement and fear such a movement could bring” (Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* 54). The proximity between Axl and the sword has rekindled the memories of his past as a warrior. This serves as a tangible reminder of the impact of objects to evoke suppressed and forgotten memories.

Later, as Axl and Beatrice become involved in the mission to slay Querig, despite originally starting their journey only to find their long-lost son. Axl is drawn back into the same kind of conflict he once left behind. The spatial connection between the dragon, the sword, and Axl acts as a bridge between his past and present selves, forcing him to confront the moral and emotional consequences of memory, war, and peace. This highlights how the physical arrangement of objects and characters reflects inner conflict and the lasting impact of suppressed histories on the present.

The novel *Klara and the Sun* is in the first-person narration of Klara and her observations and interpretations of the human world. Klara narrates with keen detail to her environment, including how objects are arranged in the room and how humans position themselves in the space. Ishiguro uses spaces and objects to show how Klara, an Artificial Friend, understands the human world. Klara often names people based on their relation to objects, like “coffee cup lady” or “rain coat man” (Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* 24), showing how her perception is shaped by what surrounds her. But her reverence for the Sun, which she believes has the power to heal, reflects her spiritual interpretation of a natural entity, revealing her human-like tendencies.

An important interobjective space is the vast difference between the idealized images Klara has only seen in magazines and the reality she encounters, revealing how objects shape her understanding of the human world. The glass window through which she always looks at the outside world, reflects her separation from the human world, providing her with a view into the outside world yet acting as a barrier isolating her from the real world. Her encounter with objects like cootings machine or the bull, reflects Klara’s ability to feel danger and fear, which contrasts her artificial nature and her human-like instincts. Similarly, when Klara is in McBain’s field to get the blessings from the Sun to heal Josie, a new dimension of Klara emerges, highlighting her sense of spirituality and her commitment to fulfilling promises and responsibilities towards those she cares for. Finally, when Klara is left in the Yard, surrounded by the “wide sky” yet unable to “move from place to place” (Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* 248), the openness of the space contrasts sharply with her confinement. This reflects her feelings of helplessness and confinement despite being surrounded by openness and freedom. These layered interactions between Klara, and various objects in her environment show how meaning also emerges from the spaces between them.

Ma(間) Between the Narrator and the Reader

Though both novels are set at the farthest ends of timeline —*The Buried Giant* in the Saxon era and *Klara and the Sun* in a distant future, it creates a dynamic narrative space for the readers. *The Buried Giant* is narrated by the Boatman who appears at the beginning and end of the novel. He is a selective omniscient narrator (who doesn’t have access to the character’s thought process) for most of the novel, only in the end (chapter-17) he shifts to first-person

narration. This amplifies the space between the narrator and the reader to demystify the role of the narrator and his reliability.

Klara, as a first-person narrator and an AI, also has limited access to the emotions of other characters. The novel unfolds as Klara, while dumped in the Yard, reflects back on her past, narrating her story through the lens of her "disoriented" memories (Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* 247), inviting readers to question the reliability of her perspective. The gaps and interruptions in Klara's memory allows her and the readers to reevaluate Klara's life and identity. Narrating and arranging her memories in order is Klara's way to find resolution, which only leads to perpetual re-interpretation and existential questioning.

A narrative is a "layer of autonomous significance" (McQuillan, 2000, 5), but the autonomy of the narrator has so many layers. For instance, *The Boatman* remains detached as an observer, whereas Klara's narrative distance is intimate and direct. This enhances the involvement of the reader and their active participation in the interpretation of the narrative. *The Boatman's* shift to the first-person narration, invites readers to reassess the previous information and to scrutinize their understanding of the plot. In the early parts of the novel, the third-person narrator serves as a paradox, distancing the audience from the protagonist as well as bring them closer by narrating their forgotten memories. Due to the distance created by the narrator, the past, present and the future merges into one, despite the characters' lack of awareness of their past. This ambiguity gives rise to gaps in the understanding of the plot—what Japanese aesthetics refer to as "Ma-like spaces" (Goda)—where the unspoken or forgotten continues to deeply influence the characters.

Klara's narrative creates a space where the reader must navigate the divide between her programmed understanding and the complex emotional landscape she attempts to navigate in the human world. The structural choices in the narrative, affect reader's perception and contribute to the thematic depth of both novels. In *The Buried Giant*, fragmented chapters and shifting perspectives reflect the characters' fragmented memories and the elusive nature of truth, while Klara's narrative reflects her complex perceptions of human world and emotions. The omissions and memory gaps, prompt readers to fill in the absent elements, transforming the act of reading into a co-creating process, where the audience actively shapes the narrative, fostering a deeper understanding of the plot.

Conclusion

The study provides a comprehensive analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* and *Klara and the Sun* through the lenses of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and the Japanese concept of *Ma* (間). The integration of these concepts reconceptualizes the function of objects, by considering them as active elements in the narrative. The article demonstrates how gaps, absences and spaces in the novels have aided in the deeper understanding of object-object relationships as well as the space between them. By analyzing the narrative functions of the objects portrayed in the novels, the article highlights that objects not only contribute to thematic or symbolic development of the narrative but also actively shapes reader experience and interpretation. The objects in these novels hold a pivotal role in revealing hidden and absent narratives, which underscores the interconnectedness of human, non-human and fictional entities. The characters in the novel often impose roles and qualities to objects in the novel, turning them into tools that serve human desires and fears. So, analyzing the spaces between objects is essential to understand the relationships and interactions that subtly influence a narrative. In terms of Object-Oriented Ontology readers and narrators are also objects, so understanding the space between them is also necessary to understand the role of both the reader and the narrator. The limitation of the study lies in the selective analysis of objects and their relational dynamics in the novel. Future studies can expand this approach and apply it to

various literary works of different genres including poetry to broaden the understanding of object agency in modern literature.

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