The Book of Merlyn Short Guide

The Book of Merlyn by T. H. White

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Overview

The Book of Merlyn begins where The Once and Future King ends—the night before Arthur's final battle. White clearly considered the book the conclusion of his Arthurian series. Almost the entire novel is devoted to returning the reader to the ending of The Once and Future King, where Arthur knows he will be defeated, but has found a way to go into battle with his heart at peace. Only the last few pages of The Book of Merlyn are devoted to completing the legend, narrating the death of Arthur and the retirement of Guenever to a convent and Lancelot to a hermitage.

Almost all critics agree that The Book of Merlyn is not as successful as The Once and Future King, that it is too cynical and too philosophical. Even White's biographer, Sylvia Warner, is critical of White's philosophizing in the novel and has written that, although modest about his creativity, he was conceited about his intellect, which she contends was second-rate.

On the other hand, the philosophy expressed in the novel is the core of White's thinking. Whether second-rate or not, it underlies The Once and Future King as surely as it does The Book of Merlyn. The situation is similar to that of J. R. R. Tolkien, who considered The Silmarillion (also published posthumously, in 1977) central to his masterpiece, the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Many critics find The Silmarillion much too difficult to read; it is heavily mythological and tends towards theological speculation. But Tolkien, who thought mythically and theologically, needed to write The Silmarillion before he could write The Lord of the Rings. White, who tended to think philosophically, needed that kind of thinking to underlie his Once and Future King. By reading The Book of Merlyn, the reader can see more clearly how White's mind worked.

Even if The Book of Merlyn is not as good as The Once and Future King, it has some very good moments. There are two major episodes; in one Merlyn turns Arthur into an ant and in another he transforms him into a wild goose. The goose episode is as engaging as anything White ever wrote. However, both of these episodes were inserted into The Sword and the Stone when it was revised for inclusion in The Once and Future King, so most readers will already be familiar with them.

About the Author

Terence Hanbury White was born on May 29, 1906, in Bombay, India. His father, Garrick Hanbury White, a district superintendent of police, and his mother, Constance White, had a tempestuous marriage. White's mother, who was considered beautiful, had been berated by her own mother for being unmarried at almost thirty. In response she swore she would marry the next man who asked her. She did, and the result was a disaster.

When he was five, White's parents placed him in school in England. They returned to India (and to their quarreling) while Terence—Tim, as his friends later called him—lived with his mother's parents, the Astons. When he was seventeen, his parents finally divorced, and even though his family life had never been good, White was devastated.

An only child, White continued to feel alone and insecure throughout his life.

To escape the sadness of his personal life, White turned to learning, just as Merlyn advises the young Arthur to do in The Sword in the Stone: "The best thing for being sad .. . is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails." White was a brilliant student at Queen's College, Cambridge, taking first class honors with distinction in English.

He was later appointed head of the English department at Stowe School.

Learning, for White, was clearly not confined to books. During a tour of America near the end of his life, White often delivered a lecture, "The Pleasures of Learning," in which he would list all the things he had learned to do. The list included archery, carpentry, knitting, flying airplanes, riding show horses, and training falcons.

Most of all, White wanted to learn to write. In 1936, he resigned his teaching position to devote his full attention to writing. Since his college days, White had been interested in Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century Morte Darthur, which recounts the story of King Arthur and his knights, and he now began writing his own work based on Malory's material. The publication and success of his first novel, The Sword in the Stone, gave White the financial independence to continue. To escape the coming war, he moved to Ireland, where he devoted himself to hunting, fishing, falconry, and developing his Arthurian novels.

The books came quickly. The Witch in the Wood (later rewritten as The Queen of Air and Darkness) was published in 1939 and was followed by The Ill-Made Knight in 1940. He finished The Candle in the Wind by 1941, but did not publish it until its inclusion in The Once and Future King—a collection of White's first four Arthurian tales—in 1958. The Book of Merlyn, also completed by 1941, was omitted from that collection and published posthumously in 1977.

Between 1940 and 1958, White continued to write, publishing the fairly successful Mistress Masham's Repose; The Goshawk (1951), a nonfiction account of his attempt to train a falcon; The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts (1954), a translation from the Latin; and other books. Yet White's powers seemed to have faded, and he never wrote anything that matched the power of his Arthurian novels.

In 1958, the publication of The Once and Future King, a best seller in both the United States and England, revived White's popularity. The saga's 1960 stage production as Camelot made White not only a wealthy man but a celebrity, and resulted in a successful speaking tour of the United States.

While on a Mediterranean cruise, the fifty-seven-year-old White suffered a fatal heart attack and died on January 17, 1964, in Piraeus, Greece—some thirteen years before the publication of The Book of Merlyn. He is buried in Athens, within sight of Hadrian's Arch and the Temple of Zeus.

Setting

White places his King Arthur in England, which Arthur calls Gramarye, during the Dark Ages, about the year 1200. Most historians think the actual King Arthur—if there was one—lived much earlier, probably around A.D. 460.

Malory, White's model, also portrayed Arthur as a medieval king. Even though White knew much about the medieval period, he intentionally employs anachronisms—things or characters that people at the time of the story could not have known—such as Merlyn's discussions of communism, Darwin, and other modern topics. White does this partially for humor but also to demonstrate that the problems people confronted in the Dark Ages were much like those of the twentieth century.

Social Sensitivity

The Book of Merlyn, partially because it is further removed from Malory than The Once and Future King, is freer from violence; there are simply not so many knights running around to get their heads lopped off. Most of the fighting in the book is left to the ants, and Arthur is snatched from the ant colony before the battle begins. Furthermore, with Lancelot and Guenever out of the book for all but the last few pages, the only sexual interest is a very gentlemanly attraction on Arthur's part for a certain female goose. In fact, White wasn't compelled to write about any human females, which seems to have suited him very well. He was well aware of the problems he had in creating female characters that were not evil.

White is also slightly less biased against people of Celtic descent in this novel than he is in The Once and Future King, perhaps, again, because of the absence of the Scottish party of Gawaine and Mordred. At one point White comes very close to saying that English patriotism is just as bad as Irish patriotism, but he cannot quite bring himself to say so.

Literary Qualities

The Book of Merlyn, as the conclusion of White's modern retelling of Malory's Le Morte Darthur, recounts one of the most important legends of the English speaking peoples. White has inherited a story and cast of characters that have enthralled readers for centuries. However, The Book of Merlyn is further removed from Malory than is The Once and Future King. Only the last few pages of the novel are devoted to Malory's material, and the events of Arthur's final battle are narrated in a curiously detached tone. In moving away from the events narrated in Malory, White falls into lecturing the reader, and even seems aware of doing so. At one point, Archimedes, Merlyn's owl, asks the philosophical wizard, "Do you realize that the audience has not understood a single word that you are saying, for several minutes?" But White seems not to have been able to stop himself any more than Lancelot could stop his relationship with Guenever.

If the reader can get through these speeches, there is a good deal of humor in the book, even though some of it is somewhat sophisticated, such as the animals reciting Darwin in chorus. Perhaps most impressive is White's rare ability to imagine what it must be like to be an animal. The description of ant life as a life under a totalitarian state is just as effective as George Orwell's depiction of a totalitarian world in Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), and far more imaginative. White's descriptions of nature as experienced by Arthur when he is transformed into a wild goose are among the best passages in all of his work.

Themes and Characters

The central theme of The Book of Merlyn is that by learning to pay attention to the natural world, humankind can learn how to avoid war and save itself from extinction. Although White was not fully conscious of this theme until he had almost completed the series, he came to think of it as the central theme of the entire Once and Future King. In 1940, he wrote to a friend that he intended to add a fifth volume to his Arthurian series because he had "suddenly discovered" that the central theme of Morte Darthur was to find "an antidote to war."

The assumption that underlies White's theme is that animals are more civilized than humans. Merlyn, the title character of the novel and the spokesperson for White's more cynical ideas, doesn't seem to think the chances for improving the human race are very good. He suggests that humankind should not be referred to as homo sapiens (wise man) but as homo stultus (foolish man) or homoferox (savage man). In this novel Merlyn is not the lovable character White created in The Once and Future King; he rails against the very idea of progress and dwells on human savageness. He is cold towards Arthur, treating his pupil as little more than a sociological experiment.

Arthur, however, evokes our sympathy. Betrayed by his wife, his best friend, and his knights, Arthur is clearly a broken man. But he struggles on, wanting to quit, yet realizing that he must find some way to continue. When Merlyn turns him into an ant, so that Arthur can experience life under a totalitarian form of government, Arthur stands alone, ready to sacrifice his life in an attempt to stop a war between ant colonies. When Arthur is turned into a wild goose, he finds among those natural anarchists, who live without nations or borders, a peace that he has never known among people. The most touching moment in the novel is when Arthur thinks he has found a last chance for peace and love with the wild goose named Lyo-lyok, only to be snatched back to human reality by Merlyn.

The other main characters are, appropriately enough, animals. At the beginning of the novel, Merlyn reunites Arthur with his animal friends from The Sword and the Stone. The king's first words as he greets these animals are highly important: he looks at his long lost friends and says simply, "Oh, People!"

Ironically, it is an animal that leads Arthur back to humanity. By the end of the novel, Merlyn seems to have won the day intellectually. He sums up his argument by saying that the causes of war are nationalism and property (perhaps aided by a biological predisposition towards violence), and, therefore, nations should be abolished. But such a conclusion is little comfort to a king fated to die for his people the next morning. At that moment, the lowly hedgehog takes Arthur into the spring night and recites lines from a poem by William Blake: I will not cease from mental strife Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand Till I have built Jerusalem On England's green and pleasant land.

Arthur realizes that life is often a matter of self-sacrifice. He regains his imperial majesty and goes to his death, not happily, but with "strong courage . . .

and a tranquil heart."

Topics for Discussion

1. Merlyn seems to have a very low opinion of the human race. He says, "People are dupes and wicked, too." Is Merlyn too critical, or do you see evidence that he is correct?

2. Merlyn also thinks that humankind is very conceited in thinking that it has progressed so much in the past two hundred years. Humankind has certainly progressed industrially, but do you think it has progressed morally? Is it possible for our species to progress morally, or is it doomed because of its "human nature?"

3. White's major theme is that people can learn to be more civilized by carefully observing the animal kingdom. Do you agree that people can learn from the animals, or is humankind essentially different from other animals? If so, what makes humans unique?

4. Merlyn makes much of the fact that humankind—homoferox, as he calls it— kills for pleasure. Are there examples in nature of animals that kill for pleasure?

5. Merlyn claims that patriotism is a major cause of wars. Is patriotism a good or a bad thing? If you believe it is right to fight for your country, is it right for people of other countries to fight against yours?

6. Although Merlyn seems to think patriotism is not a good thing, King Arthur is a patriotic Englishman. What do you think White himself thought? Was he more like Merlyn or Arthur?

7. Merlyn finally suggests that nations should be abolished. Do you agree?

Would it be possible to do this? Whether or not it is possible, would it be a good thing to do?

8. Arthur finally learns that sometimes you must sacrifice yourself for your people, your country, or something you believe in. Does that conflict with Merlyn's idea that the individual is always more important than the state? Are there times when the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the individual?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. When Arthur first sees his animal friends, he calls them "people." According to the contemporary poet Gary Snyder, the Sioux used to refer to animals as "the creeping people," fish as "the swimming people," and birds as "the flying people." Conduct some research into Native American attitudes toward animals and nature, and compare them to White's views. What did the Sioux think humans could learn from the "creeping people?"

2. Native American mythology includes many legends of people taking on the shape of animals, but so do the mythologies of other peoples, including the Celts. White mentions the Children of Lir. White also mentions Cervantes's belief that Arthur was turned into a raven. That belief seems to have been developed by the people of Cornwall, who knew the legends of the Celtic god Bran, whose name means "raven." Read some Celtic legends. How do they compare to White's stories of Merlyn turning Arthur into animals and birds?

3. Merlyn's idea that war might be caused by some human biological mechanism should not be taken too lightly.

Consult Konrad Lorenz's book On Aggression (1974). Are there reasons to believe that there are biological reasons for humankind's violent nature?

4. Compare White's totalitarian ant colony to the government in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. What are the similarities and differences?

5. In The Book of Merlyn, White seems to depart from his model, Malory's Morte Darthar. Read the last few pages of Malory's book, which describes the final combat between Arthur and Mordred.

Why did White choose to leave this fight out? Is White's Arthur the same person as Malory's? How are they different?

Why do you think White and Malory might disagree on some major issues?

For Further Reference

Gallix, Francois, ed. T. H. White: Letters to a Friend. Gloucester, England: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1984. A collection of letters from White to his friends L. J. and Mary Potts. L. J. Potts was White's teacher at Cambridge and he and his wife became lifelong friends of White's. The letters are important because White sought his old teacher's literary advice.

Garnett, David. The White/Garnett Letters. London: Jonathan Cape and Chatto & Windus, 1968. Garnett was perhaps White's closest friend and one of his staunchest supporters.

Schonberg, H. C. "Review." New York Times Book Review (November 27, 1977): 15. Schonberg's response to The Book of Merlyn is representative of that of most critics. He finds the novel too "didactic . . . often immature in its reasoning." But he admits that "there are a few brilliant passages" and concludes that "If the book is a failure .. . it nevertheless is the failure of a wonderful writer."

Warner, Sylvia Townshed. T. H. White: A Biography. New York: Viking Press, 1967. The standard biography of T. H. White.

Related Titles

T. H. White published The Sword in the Stone, the first part of his Arthurian series, in 1938. The second book, The Witch in the Wood, was also published as a separate book, in 1939, as was the third book, The Ill-Made Knight, in 1940.

White finished a fourth book, The Candle in the Wind, as well as The Book of Merlyn, in 1941. He also revised the first three books, particularly altering The Witch in the Wood, which was renamed The Queen of Air and Darkness. White originally intended to publish all five books as The Once and Future King, but his publishers refused to publish the entire collection, citing a wartime paper shortage. This paper shortage was a genuine problem, but many critics think that the publishers did not want to publish The Book of Merlyn because it was too philosophical, too political, and too bitter over humankind's failure to become civilized.

In any event, White insisted on including The Book of Merlyn, and nothing was republished until 1958. At that time, the fourth book was included in The Once and Future King, but The Book of Merlyn was omitted. Two important scenes, however—one in which Arthur is turned into an ant, and another where he is turned into a wild goose—were lifted directly from The Book of Merlyn and inserted in The Sword in the Stone.

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