

The Hollow Hills Study Guide

The Hollow Hills by Mary Stewart

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Plot Summary

The novel begins the day after Arthur is conceived. Merlin awakes after being thrown from his horse to find that Duke Gorlois of Tintagel was killed in a fight. However, Merlin knows the fight occurred only because King Uther Pendragon wanted to sleep with Duchess Ygraine of Tintagel. Uther used Merlin and his “magic” to slip past the guards and to get Ygraine to sleep with him. Merlin has the gift of foresight, so he knows this union will result in the birth of the greatest king of England. The only stipulation to the agreement was that Merlin would raise the child as he saw fit. Merlin immediately goes into hiding at Bryn Myrrdin, a large cave he has made into his home.

A young boy, Ralf, brings word of Ygraine’s pregnancy. Since her own husband died, Uther made her his wife. Merlin was waiting for a summons from one of them to discuss plans for the illegitimate baby. Ygraine called upon Merlin first, and she said Uther was wary of the child. Uther was talking about plans to send Arthur to someone else, and Ygraine wanted Merlin to talk Uther out of his idea. Merlin and Ralf set out to find Uther on the battlefield. However, they come across Uther’s camp at a river crossing, and the two men talk. Merlin gives his word that the best thing for the child would be to have Merlin raise him in secret. If Uther doesn’t have another male heir, then Arthur would be the only Pendragon left to secure the throne. Uther comes to his senses and agrees. Months later, Merlin is called to Tintagel to be present for the birth of Arthur.

Merlin knows Uther’s enemies will believe the infant Arthur is with him, so Merlin leaves Arthur in the care of the woman who raised him. He leaves Ralf behind to watch for any danger that might befall Arthur. Merlin then leaves and travels east to Constantinople and beyond. While there, he receives a vision of a sword that belonged to Magnus Maximus, the first king of Britain. He doesn’t know where he will find it, but he realizes his visions are leading him to this sword. Merlin then gets word Uther is extremely sick and hasn’t yet produced another male heir. Merlin travels back to England and visits the King.

The King wants to know where Arthur is, and Merlin tells him Arthur was moved to Count Ector’s court; Ector was a good friend of Merlin’s father and an ally of the Pendragon throne. Merlin assured Uther that Ector could be trusted. Merlin leaves to go back to Bryn Myrrdin, but he knows many of Uther’s enemies will be spying on him. He must be careful not to lead them to Arthur. A group of spies sneaks into Merlin’s home to attempt to find Arthur. Merlin intentionally sends them on another path and immediately leaves to find Arthur.

While on his way, Merlin begins to get slightly distracted. He follows a number of signs that lead him to a tower, now in ruins. He investigates and finds a sword wrapped tightly. He knows this to be the sword he saw in his dreams, but he also knows the sword wasn’t meant for him. He then visits an old chapel sanctuary high above Ector’s home. When he arrives, he knows this place will hold a special meaning in Arthur’s future. He takes the sword to a lost castle in the middle of a lake and leaves it on an altar. Later, a



young boy rides up to him at the sanctuary, and Merlin knows he is Arthur. However, he only reveals himself to Ralf and Ector. The others know him only as a lonely enchanter.

Arthur, now nine, becomes infatuated with Merlin and all his travels. Staying true to his word to help raise the boy, Merlin uses the time to teach Arthur about the ways of kings and helps develop his character. For four years their relationship builds, but Merlin does not tell Arthur about his true identity. One day, though, Arthur chases his hound and a stag to the castle in the lake. While he is away, a group of soldiers led by Cador, son of the dead duke Gorlois, finds Merlin. At first Merlin thinks they are going to kill him and Arthur. But when he realizes they are on his side, he knows Arthur is ready to join his father Uther in battle. Arthur had returned with the sword, but Merlin took it away and left it on the sanctuary altar for a later time.

The group arrives at the battle. Merlin visits a near-death Uther and tells him his son has arrived. Before they could begin the formalities, though, the Saxons attack. Uther, Arthur, and the others go into battle while Merlin watches from afar. The Saxons almost defeat the Britons and nearly kill Uther. At the last moment, Uther throws his sword into Arthur's hand, and Arthur leads the army to victory. Merlin knows this show will secure Arthur's place in the hearts and minds of the army, and they will know he is their true leader.

At the victory festival, Uther declares Arthur is his long-lost son and the heir to the Pendragon throne. Lot, an ambitious lesser king, says Arthur isn't ready to be king. He says Uther should prove it by handing over his own sword, and thus the throne, to Arthur now. While in the act, Uther's sword breaks and Uther immediately dies. Chaos ensues in the room, and the men argue over who should be king. So Cador mentions he saw Arthur with the most magnificent of all swords a few days earlier. Merlin mentions the sword is enchanted and only the true king can lift it. Lot then says they should see Arthur take the sword in person. The next morning, the entire camp leaves for the sanctuary. When they arrive, they watch in awe as Arthur takes hold of the sword and releases it from its stone-like wrappings. He is hailed as the true king of England.



Book 1, Chapters 1-5

Summary

The novel begins in medias res with Merlin unconscious in a ditch. A boy helps him up, and Merlin begins questioning him about the night before. It is revealed that Merlin, the illegitimate son of the deceased High King Abrosius, had helped his uncle High King Uther Pendragon disguise himself and sleep with Countess Ygraine, wife of Count Gorlois. Uther begged Merlin to use his “magic” to deceive everyone so he could get into Tintagel unnoticed. There was a skirmish, though, and Gorlois was killed in action. Merlin agreed to take the blame for the entire trick if Uther agreed to let him raise the child resulting from the union. He saw, in a vision, the son born of the union would be a great leader for England. So Merlin went to his home Bryn Myrden, a cave, to heal and wait for the child to be born.

About three months later, Merlin saw a man get attacked on the road below Bryn Myrden. Merlin went to see the damage, and he brought the young man, a messenger back to his home. Ralf was a servant of Ygraine, now Queen Ygraine since she had married Uther days after her husband’s funeral. Ralf had been cast out of Uther’s favor, so his grandmother charged him to work as Merlin’s servant until the time came for him to come back and serve the Queen. Ralf was angry, but he eventually settled into the quiet life with Merlin. Weeks later, another messenger arrived saying the Queen requested Merlin meet with her privately. It was decided Merlin and Ralf would go to the Queen in the next month, disguised as an eye doctor and his apprentice.

Analysis

Even though Mary Stewart wrote *The Hollow Hills* as the second book in a string of novels about the Arthurian legend, it is easy to tell she wants to make sure readers can pick up *The Hollow Hills* independently of the other books and know exactly what is going on. So in the first chapter, she tells the novel’s “backstory” in a unique way: Merlin is unconscious, and he asks a young shepherd boy to tell him what happened the night before. Because Merlin is the narrator, he pieces the previous night together slowly and begins to remember more details. As he figures them out, he narrates them for the reader. He also makes certain to explain every person’s title and relationship with the others. Because there are so many different Arthurian legends, Stewart had to make the relationship between the characters definitive. For example, some texts say that Merlin is not nobility, but a wizard. Stewart, though, allows Merlin to be in the inner circle of action by making him Uther’s nephew.

It was also important for Stewart to define exactly who Merlin was in reference to his “powers.” The common belief is that Merlin is a great and powerful wizard who can fly, disappear, and shape-shift at his own will. However, Stewart toned down Merlin’s abilities and made his gifts more believable for modern-day audiences. Rather than



possessing unmatched magic, Merlin is only able to herald “powers” when the divine spirits use him as a vessel. Other than that, Merlin is a quiet and observational man. He is a master alchemist and creates the best potions in the known world. Stewart then shows how the mythical, all-powerful Merlin was created. He was a figment of people’s minds. People saw Merlin use illusions or fell for his cunning plots of deception, so they invented wild tales about his magical strength. Merlin, however, used these rumors to his advantage. For example, if people thought he held Arthur on a secret island, they would not look for him in the Wild Forest.

Vocabulary

lark, arched, furze, clad, wary, impregnable, guile, penance, scabbard, sallied, prosaic, nepenthe, balsam, bier, tallow, resin, tributary, maimed, staple, sumptuous, morose, wincing, tainted, sullen, bidden, incurred, doting, menial, privily, candor, punitive, siring, plied, arbitrary, osier, gaiety



Book 1, Chapters 6-10

Summary

While waiting at an inn near Tintagel, Merlin and Ralf saw an opportunity to find their way into the castle. Merlin went to meet the Queen, and she was swollen with the pregnancy. She was excited to see Merlin, but she didn't have good news to tell. Uther blamed Merlin for Gorlois' death, and he had changed his mind about who would raise Arthur. Uther wanted to send the boy away to the king of Less Britain, his cousin Hoen. He thought nobody would accept the boy as his heir because they would realize he was conceived while Ygraine and Gorlois were still married. Ygraine, though, asked Merlin if he would convince Uther to let the boy stay with him.

Merlin and Ralf left immediately for Uther's camp. However, since the Queen had spoken to Merlin in secret, Merlin was thinking of a way to explain his unannounced presence to Uther. The journey was dangerous, but Merlin caught up with Uther at a river crossing. The two men met, and Uther apologized for blaming Merlin for Gorlois' death. Then Uther confessed there were men who would want the boy to be killed if he turned out to be the heir to the Pendragon throne. Merlin suggested Cador, the son of Gorlois, but Uther waived off Merlin's suspicions. Then Uther, in his own way, asked Merlin if he would find a way to keep the boy safe. Merlin said he would let his nurse raise the boy with Ralf to protect him. After that, Merlin would take him to a place where no one would think to find him. Then Merlin set out to prepare the plan for the boy's arrival. He went to see his father's old friend Count Ector and asked him if he would foster the boy after he had been nursed. Ector was honored that Merlin came to him, and he agreed.

Analysis

Inferring from Merlin's narration, he believes the mark of a true noble was the ability to put aside personal desires and do what was best for their country. He saw this quality in Queen Ygraine when he secretly visited her at Tintagel. After she became pregnant with Arthur, she "seemed to brood" like an earth-bound bird. While she knew her pregnancy and marriage to Uther would keep her forever caged, Ygraine gave up her former life in order to secure a place for her son. She didn't want to give him over to Merlin, but she saw his safekeeping was the only way Arthur could have a chance to be king. So Ygraine put aside her nurturing instinct and instead focused on her duties as Queen.

Even though Merlin saw Ygraine as a selfless noble, he didn't view Uther quite the same way. Uther was less interested in Merlin's prophesy about Arthur and instead focused on producing another male heir. In a way, it was his right to want a "better" option than what he had agreed to already with Merlin. But he also didn't trust Merlin could see the future and Arthur would be the greatest king of England. While Merlin was able to convince Uther to let him raise Arthur as he saw fit, he could tell it hurt the king



to grant him custody and guardianship. Merlin knew Uther was a good king, but he also saw Uther let his masculinity and pride get in the way of his duties to his kingdom.

Vocabulary

wrangled, daubed, ochre, ricks, decoction, sloes, placidly, ruse, mettle, indulgent, embrasure, mewed, mottled, pallor, mite, perforce, contriving, betide, fetid, agues, patois, estuary, abed, enmity, assenting, askance, unchancy, ostensibly, query, statuesque, belied, plaguy



Book 1, Chapters 11-14

Summary

An hour before Christmas, Arthur was born. Merlin waited at Tintagel for word the boy was healthy enough to travel in the wintertime. After three days, Merlin and the party set out for his nurse's house. The travel was difficult on everyone, especially Merlin and Branwen, the young girl posing as Arthur's mother. But they never complained and they carried on. When they reached Uther's cousin's castle, Merlin let him know their castle was not the final destination; it was only a ruse. He told Hoen it was imperative Hoen keep the secret as long as possible, and Hoen agreed.

Once they reached their final destination, the group slept heavily. Moravik, the innkeeper's wife and Merlin's old nurse, was immediately smitten with Arthur. For the journey, Merlin had posed as a bard. When the other inn patrons saw him, they demanded he play for them. He sang the story of Magnus Maximus, known to the Britons as Mascen Wledig. Later than night, Merlin dreamed he saw a beautiful sword lying ready for him to find.

Analysis

In most of the old texts surrounding the Arthurian legend, Arthur is held as a Christ figure, the great king who would save his people. The first time that Stewart compares Arthur to Christ is by giving him a Christmas birthday. While not explicitly calling Arthur a Christ figure, this allusion gives credence to Arthur's credibility as a kind of savior. Another allusion is the appearance of the Eastern Star. In the Bible, the star led the wise men to Jesus. In The Hollow Hills, the star led Merlin, Arthur, and their party to safety. These signs all made Arthur special, especially to Merlin, who knew Arthur would be a gallant and noble king.

The tale of Mascen Wledig is a famous story in Celtic mythology. According to the legends, Maccsen was a Roman general (known as Magnus Maximus) who had a dream about a beautiful castle where he met the most beautiful woman in the world. When he awoke, he dedicated his life to finding this place. He arrived in Britain and saw the castle as well as the woman, Elen. The two were married, and he drove the Roman occupation out of Britain. He was then proclaimed as the first high king of Britain. Telling this story at the inn would be a starting point for Merlin's own quest; immediately after finishing the tale, he had a dream about a famous sword, Maccsen's sword. His first journey with Arthur was over, but he knew finding this sword would be an important step in proclaiming Arthur king.



Vocabulary

promontory, sheer, precarious, postern, pallet, pearling, dour, haven, civilly, ewer, sumptuous, stalwart, morsel, fervently, rouse, subsidiary, stolidly, imperturbable, carrion, scud, dubiously, puckered, aura, mosaic, vervain



Book 2, Chapters 1-5

Summary

Knowing Arthur was safe, Merlin left immediately for the east. He went to Rome and Constantinople, but he made sure to keep an eye out for trouble. He was able to watch the “family” grow up by looking into fire. One time, he saw a group of bandits attack the party while they transported Arthur to Count Ector’s land. Luckily, all of the party made it out alive. However, that was the kind of danger Merlin was expecting for the young future king. While in Constantinople, Merlin stayed with a distant relative. They were discussing Arthur’s future when Merlin spotted a tapestry behind his host. He recognized the sword in the picture as the sword in his dream. His host told him the sword belonged to Magnus Maximus, the first true King of Britain. Merlin had to leave suddenly when he received word Uther had become very ill.

Merlin arrived in Britain and immediately went to the king. Uther told Merlin he had suffered an injury to his groin and wasn’t able to have any more children. This meant Arthur, his only son, would have to be king. Merlin told Uther Arthur was safe, and he let Uther know Arthur was with Ector. Uther agreed the Wild Forest was the best place for Arthur, and he told Merlin to personally finish Arthur’s training. Merlin left to make the king a medicine for his wound, and Merlin saw Morgause, Uther’s illegitimate first child, for the first time since she was young. She had become practiced in medicine and alchemy, but she wanted Merlin to teach her how to be a seer. Merlin told her it wasn’t a gift he could teach, and Morgause left.

Analysis

Even though Merlin didn’t know the depth of his powers, he knew he possessed some sort of ethereal vision. By looking into fire, he could see what the gods wanted him to see. Merlin wasn’t sure which divinities were giving him the powers. At the time, England was divided between Christianity and the “pagan” Roman gods. The nobles believed in Jesus while the people of the country still worshipped the pantheon of gods and goddesses. Merlin never made a judgment on which gods were right and wrong; all he knew was that, somewhere, a powerful spiritual force was guiding him to secure Arthur’s destiny.

Each time Merlin sees Uther, the king grows wiser and more accepting of Merlin’s status as his illegitimate nephew. Uther was always jealous of the love and attention Ambrosius, his brother, gave Merlin. Uther believed his efforts should be placed into another son, an heir. However, Ambrosius was able to tell Merlin was special. Even though Uther knows Merlin doesn’t like him, he sees Merlin is completely dedicated to Arthur and to the future of the country. He is coming to terms with Arthur’s own illegitimacy and it is beginning to bother him less and less - especially since he will have no opportunity to produce another male heir.

Vocabulary

pomp, brazier, trough, ardent, surreptitious, avid, dogmatizing, tesserae, balustrade, sporadic, ensconced, flagon, regent, goad, eunuch, contingent, traducing, whit, formidable, inferred, portended, commiseration, gelding, ratifying, apparatus, demure, sup, adept, pungent



Book 2, Chapters 6-11

Summary

Because the king still had not produced a male heir, many of the other nobles were getting worried about the throne. Merlin knew some were malicious and if they knew about Arthur, they might try to harm him, so he stayed at Bryn Myrdden until he was sure he could go to Arthur without being detected. He waited for a sign, and he found one when a group of spies approached his cave. They tried to say they were the King's messengers, but Merlin knew not to trust them. He gave them a misdirection, and then he departed as soon as they left his cave.

One night when Merlin was sleeping on the road, a group of men surrounded him. They tied him and kept him hostage. Their language was different, but Merlin was able to listen because he knew the Old Tongue. Once he was able to gain their trust, Merlin told them of his plan. Their leader Llyd was respectful and knew Merlin was a good man with good intentions. He supported Arthur's rise to power, so he said they would help protect both Merlin and Arthur from afar.

Merlin's horse Strawberry had a shoe that fell off, so Merlin had to stray from his intended path in order to get it fixed. He came to a smith who was able to fix the shoe. While there, the smith told Merlin about an abandoned road that would take him around any soldiers on the main road. Merlin took the chance and went on the road, where he discovered the ruins of Mascen's Tower, the same tower he had seen in the tapestry in Constantinople. He began poking around and felt the gods performing magic through him. He lifted an altar and found the sword of his dreams. He then left and came across an old sanctuary. The keeper was dying, but he stayed alive long enough to show Merlin the sanctuary was a sacred place that had kept a special grail and sword, but they were no longer there.

Analysis

During his travels, Merlin was beginning to understand just how loyal the people of England were to the Pendragon throne. They knew Uther was a good and strong king, and they believed his heir would be as good of a king as Uther. Merlin saw this during his conversation with Llyd, the leader of the men from the hills. Llyd and his men knew there were nobles with selfish, greedy reasons for wanting the throne. If they got it, then his people would be pushed away into obscurity. The Pendragon throne had been kind to people of all types and had tolerated the different religions and ways of life. Yet there were others that wanted to rule and control England with absolute power and authority.

When Merlin finds the sword, he did so by being drawn from his original path by divine signs. Again, he did not know who or what gave him the signs, but he willingly accepted them. The fact that he was able to handle the sword, Caliburn, though, is curious. The



sword could only be touched by the true king of England according to the spirit voices. It seems as though Merlin should have been high king instead of Uther or Arthur. The fact that he could lift it meant the sword didn't see Merlin as an illegitimate son unworthy of the throne. The sword knew Merlin was a fair, just, and wise man. Merlin pushed aside any thoughts of himself, though, and instead focused on Arthur's claim to the throne. He was so dedicated to Arthur he sacrificed any claim to royal power so Arthur could succeed.

Vocabulary

staves, downcast, limpid, dogged, grim, apt, kiln, rampart, fronds, apse, gnarled, afoot, acrid, portends, solitary, bellows, assent, derelict, plinth, seer, cistern, lintel, margin, oblong, statuary, cordial, impetus, imperceptibly, lucent



Book 3, Chapters 1-5

Summary

After the first keeper died, Merlin decided that the sanctuary was a good place to stay. It was close to Arthur, so it would be easy to keep an eye on him from there. He knew, though, he couldn't keep the sword there in case someone found him. The townspeople had told him of *Caer Bannog*, a mysterious castle in the middle of a lake. Merlin saw the castle would be the best place for the sword; everyone was afraid to go to the castle, so it would be protected. He went and laid the sword on a stone tablet and left.

In the spring, Merlin finally got his chance to see Arthur. The nine-year-old boy was riding by the sanctuary and hid inside. He told Merlin to cover for him while he hid. Ralf, much older now, came up and recognized Merlin almost immediately. Merlin, though, wanted to keep his identity from Arthur, so he told Ralf to leave for a few hours and come back. Merlin then got to know the boy he was bound to raise, and the two soon formed a close and loving friendship. Arthur, his foster brother Cai, and his best friend Bedwyr came to visit almost every day. Merlin would tell them stories about past kings or teach them songs and potions. Merlin could see that Arthur, even though everyone thought he was illegitimate, was the most regal and strong of the three boys.

Analysis

In the regular Arthurian myth, *Caer Bannog* represents Avalon, the place where Arthur originally found the sword. However, Stewart chose to take a more realistic approach and tell the story in a more probable way. Instead of there being a mysterious Lady of the Lake, it was Merlin who put the sword there for safekeeping. Using mythology and rumors again, Merlin knew nobody would approach *Caer Bannog* in fear that they would become trapped in the mysterious rising and falling castle. However, Merlin relied on the gods to give Arthur the power and strength to visit *Caer Bannog* when the time was right.

While Arthur was still a pleasant boy, Merlin could tell he possessed qualities from both his father and his mother. From his father he received his lust for adventure and danger. Arthur was intrigued with Merlin's stories about far-away lands and the myths of his people. However, he also retained a practical side about the people of these lands. He wanted to know the differences in their cultures, religions, and languages. Like a great king, he wanted knowledge in every subject possible. Most importantly, though, he wanted to do the right thing and be a good person.

Vocabulary

perforce, mire, swarthy, contrive, niche, abbot, wheeled, vitality, aslant, duly, ply, gilded, excel, ascribe, unwontedly, amassed, wont, idle, inadvertence, beset, felicitations



Book 3, Chapters 6-9

Summary

Three years later, the Britons were having problems with the Saxon borders. Things were looking grim for Uther's army, and people were noticing Uther was getting more fragile by the day. Both Cai and Bedwyr were called to fight, and Arthur was left alone. One day, he was chasing a white stag with his dog. Both the stag and the dog ran to the island of Caer Bannog, and Arthur followed to get his dog back. Merlin knew this was the day Arthur's destiny would show itself, so he waited at the sanctuary. However, he knew something was amiss. He didn't realize, though, Cador's men had found him and Ralf. Cador approached Merlin and was intimidating him when Arthur burst through the forest and threatened Cador. He was holding the sword that Merlin had found for him. Cador knew he had just seen Uther's secret heir, and he was shocked. Merlin told Ralf and Arthur to go to the sanctuary and wait.

Merlin was suspicious of Cador and his motives. However, Cador proved he was on Uther's side. He was pleased Uther had an heir to the throne. He said the man he was worried about was King Lot of Lothrien. For the past few years, Lot had tried to gain more land by weaseling himself into Uther's favor by marrying his daughter. However, there was word he was also working with the Saxons. That way, he would still remain a king regardless of who won the war. But Cador came with bad news. The Britons were beginning to lose, and Uther looked like he would die any day. Merlin, knowing this was the time to bring Arthur into public view, told Ralf and Arthur to prepare for battle. Using magic, he placed the sword in the stone altar and left it there for a later time.

Analysis

Because Merlin is the narrator for *The Hollow Hills*, this has allowed readers to see events that most characters would not have seen such as Merlin's visions and a removed view of each of the main characters. However, his vision can only go so far. When Arthur finds the sword on the stone tablet, Merlin isn't able to see it. To tell that part of the story, though, Stewart uses another device. She uses Merlin's voice to describe how he thought Arthur found it. Finding the sword was a magical and important moment in the Arthurian legend, and having Merlin narrate the entire sequence from first person might have destroyed the element of believability Stewart had tried to secure. Instead, Stewart leaves it a bit up to the reader's imagination. By allowing not even Arthur to remember how it happened, she can emphasize its mystique.

Vocabulary

astride, fetlock, mitigation, acidly, curtly, jib, enmity, supplanter, realist, rap, slake



Book 4, Chapters 1-5

Summary

When the group arrived, Merlin saw Uther was near death. Uther, though, was relieved and proud when he saw his son walking up to the camp. He wanted to introduce himself, but the Saxons began attacking almost immediately after the group arrived. Uther had his men carry him onto the battle field, and he asked Arthur to fight by his side. Merlin stayed behind and watched as the Saxons gained control of the land. The Britons were waiting for Lot and his reserves to help them, but Lot stayed behind and waited to see which side to support. However, in a crucial moment, the King tossed his sword to Arthur, and Arthur then led the charge and defeated the Saxons.

Later, Merlin left Arthur in their rooms and went to see Uther. Uther was proud of Arthur's accomplishments, and he knew very few would try to contest his son's legitimacy. He was angry with Lot for his behavior, but there was nothing he could do about it, since he had promised his daughter to Lot nearly ten years earlier. When Merlin came back, he saw that Arthur was gone. He learned that Morgause had called for him. Merlin was afraid for Arthur, so he looked into a fire and saw the two sleeping together. Morgause had an evil, contemptible look on her face like she was planning something terrible.

Arthur came back a few hours later, and Merlin knew that he had to tell Arthur the truth right then. Arthur was shocked at the news, but he was even more appalled that he had slept with his sister. The whole ordeal overwhelmed him, but Merlin tried to calm him by making him accept his actions. He didn't sleep with Morgause with ill-intent, so it was an honest mistake. Merlin knew, though, that nothing good would come of their union. He sent Arthur off to bed while he figured out a way to handle the situation with Morgause.

Analysis

After watching Arthur fight with Uther on the battlefield, the people knew Arthur had to be the son Uther would claim as his heir to the throne. The stories had flown around that Arthur was with Merlin, so when Merlin approached Uther with Arthur at his side, he could tell everyone suspected who Arthur was. However, he knew the best way to allow Arthur to be accepted as king would be for Arthur to prove himself. He did just this on the battlefield. Then when Uther tossed Arthur his sword, the people saw it as a symbolic gesture of Uther passing along his throne to Arthur. It only helped cement Arthur as the heir when Arthur used his father's sword to win the fight for the Britons.

Again, the theme of illegitimacy is explored when Arthur and Morgause, both illegitimate, sleep with one another. Merlin knows that this union will eventually lead to Arthur's demise. When he explained Arthur's parentage, Arthur was upset for Morgause. While he was afraid for himself, he was more afraid for her and what this would do to



her reputation. This selflessness is exactly what Merlin knew would make Arthur a great king. But Arthur, still only fourteen, needed consolation and help on how to cope with the situation. Merlin provides this help to Arthur by telling him real men live with their actions and deal with the consequences when they finally come.

Vocabulary

garths, chaos, canker, ably, plinth, endowed, omen, allotted, exalted, morrow, peremptory, rancor, patent, prestige, dissidents, acquitted, derisive, entrails, languor, jargoning, rigid, impute, vestiges, raveled, connivance



Book 4, Chapters 6-11

Summary

Merlin called Morgause to his room. She was very protective of her actions, but Merlin called her out for her trickery and lies. Morgause never admitted to her evil intent, but she did not deny Merlin's claims, either. Merlin told Morgause she would leave immediately and never come back. The girl protested, but Merlin told her nobody would want to see her ever again, especially Arthur once he was crowned. He showed her every way she had hurt herself and her chances of power, and she was forced to leave in shame.

Later that night at the victory dinner, Uther stood up and proclaimed Arthur as his son and heir to the throne. The majority of men in attendance were thrilled because they had seen Arthur's bravery on the battlefield. Lot, however, stood and declared Arthur was too young and inexperienced. He thought the title should go to someone with more maturity and knowledge. A fight ensued, and Lot told Uther to hand over his sword to Arthur right then if he believed Arthur was his heir. Uther agreed, even though it meant he officially abdicated his throne. He began to take the sword out of its sheath, but the hilt broke immediately. Uther then died.

The men began to fight about how the broken sword and Uther's death were a "sign" that Arthur was the wrong choice. However, Cador and others were able to convince most of the men the sword had been tampered with so it would break. Then Cador told the men about the other sword, the one Arthur was wielding when he first met him days ago. Merlin proclaimed that only the true high king could wield the sword, and any other man who touched it would die. They all agreed that they would go in the morning and see Arthur take the sword.

The next morning, a large group of nobles, warriors, and common people crowded around the sanctuary. The sword and stone tablet were surrounded by white fire, but Merlin assured Arthur that he could do it. Arthur went up to the stone and grabbed the sword. Lot was the first man to fall to his knees, and the other men followed suit. Arthur greeted and thanked everyone. After they all left, he told Merlin he appreciated him and he knew Merlin was the true High King of England.

Analysis

When Merlin spoke with Morgause, he told her her actions would not be tolerated. They both knew she was with child, but only Merlin knew that this child would ultimately kill his father. However, he still scolded Morgause for tricking her own brother and called her out on her evil intent. He explained to her she would never be truly accepted by anyone of noble birth ever again because everyone loved Arthur more than her.



Morgause had changed from the quiet, shy girl to a truly power-hungry woman, and Merlin knew it was best that Arthur not have to worry about her for years to come.

Earlier, Merlin was able to touch the sword, Caliburn, without harm. At the end of the novel, Arthur knew this as well. Arthur didn't see himself as the king; instead, he saw Merlin as the true High King of England. He knew that, without Merlin's help and guidance, he would never have been given this opportunity. Though he does so in private, Arthur calls himself Merlin's servant because he is forever in Merlin's debt. The novel uses this play of characters to highlight the theme of illegitimacy and how it shouldn't have affected how men chose their heirs. Instead, the story asserts a king is made by his heart and resolve, not his parentage.

Vocabulary

pretense, demure, contemptuous, obstinately, dispossess, brooding, besieged, inferred, verbatim, stifles, hemmed, expediency, paling, resplendent, augury, malady, parcel, ashen, vested, abdication, palsy, capitulation, abnegation, proffered, balefully, jarred, askance, admonitory, ferment, repining, perilous, warily, dislodge, billet, singe, accoutrements



Characters

Merlin/Myrddin Emrys

Merlin is the main character and narrator of *The Hollow Hills*. He is the illegitimate son of King Ambrosius, the nephew of Uther Pendragon, and the cousin of Arthur Pendragon. He is an alchemist who has a strange power and gift from the gods. He receives visions at times, and he can also look into fire and see the present. However, most of the known world created fantastical stories about his “magic” powers and abilities.

Merlin is a quiet man who learned to observe well. He sees good and bad characteristics in people. Because of this, he is able to keep a steady and calm disposition most of the time. He feels like his entire life's purpose was to raise Arthur into a just man and bring him into power. Because Arthur is his entire life, Merlin loves Arthur more than a father loves a son.

Arthur Pendragon/Emrys

Arthur Pendragon is the legendary King Arthur and the focus of the story. He is the son of Uther and Ygraine, and he is the cousin of Merlin. Because his identity was kept secret, people believed Arthur was off in some enchanted land with Merlin learning magic and enchantments. He was even brought up on these stories himself, so he did not suspect that he would be the heir of the Pendragon throne.

Arthur is a bright, intelligent, and healthy young boy. He has his father's bravado and grand nature tempered with his mother's sincerity. He excelled at every sport and subject. By age nine, he surpassed his older foster brother in swordplay and horseback riding. According to Merlin and others, he was meant to be king. Everything about him, from his personality and looks to his skills, said that he was of royal blood. He is signified by the color white, a color that he chose for himself.

Ralf

Ralf is a boy who originally worked for Ygraine. After helping Uther sleep with Ygraine, Ralf was banished from the castle and sent to serve Merlin. He was angry that Uther cast him out of Ygraine's service, but he came to adore and serve Merlin like a master. As he grew older, he became a strong and handsome man. He was charged with protecting Arthur for the entirety of Arthur's childhood, and he kept his word to Merlin. Even though Ralf officially served Arthur once he became king, Ralf still considered himself to be Merlin's servant.



Uther Pendragon

Uther Pendragon is the High King of Britain. He was the younger brother of King Ambrosius and then claimed the throne once Ambrosius died. Therefore, he is the uncle of Merlin. Uther is also the father of Arthur. With Merlin's help, he tricked Ygraine to sleep with him the night that her husband was killed. Uther is described as an anxious man. He is pleasant and likeable, and his troops know him to be a strong leader. However, he is prone to anger and suffers from his pride. For the majority of his life, he does not like Merlin but respects him because Merlin is his nephew. Before his death, he realizes that Merlin has been an invaluable ally and realizes his mistake in treating him like an illegitimate family member.

King Lot of Lothian

Lot is the eponymous king of Lothian, a region in present-day Scotland. He is the unseen villain and enemy of Arthur because he wants the Pendragon throne for himself. He sees Arthur as a threat to his rise to power, so he sends spies to have Arthur and Merlin found. Throughout the story, Lot is said to be loyal to no side but his own; if the Britons win the war, he wants to gain land and wealth by marrying Uther's youngest daughter. However, he was also said to have helped the Saxons with their own campaign against England. Either way, Lot wanted to be on the winning side in order to accumulate more power. When Arthur is pronounced as Uther's heir, Lot protests in favor of someone more experienced than a fourteen-year-old boy. When Arthur unsheathes the sword, though, Lot saves face and is the first to bow to his new king.

Count Ector of Galava

Count Ector is the foster father of Arthur for ten years. He was a good friend and ally to King Ambrosius, so Merlin knows he can be trusted with Arthur's secret and safety. He loves Merlin and Arthur like he loves his own son. Ector lives up north near the Wild Forest outside the settled lands, so no spies would think to look for Arthur in his home because of the danger of the environment. Ector is described as a man of common sense and practicality. Like Merlin, he can see the good in many people, yet he is not deceived easily.

Duke Cador of Cornwall

Duke Cador is the son of the slain Gorlois. For the first half of his journey, Merlin thinks Cador has evil intent and wants to kill Arthur before he can take his place as king. It made sense to Merlin because Cador's father was killed while Arthur was conceived. However, Cador proves himself to be a formidable and trustworthy ally to the Pendragon throne. He stands up for Arthur's legitimacy and mentions the sword he saw Arthur wield.



Magnus Maximus/Macsen Wledig

Magnus Maximus is the first King of Britain. Though Roman by birth, he drove the Roman presence out of Britain and declared it an independent nation. According to legend, he is the ancestor of the Pendragons. Merlin sees Maximus in a number of visions, each time mentioning a sword that belongs to his rightful heir. It is this sword that Merlin finds and Arthur uses to proclaim himself king.



Objects/Places

Tintagel

Tintagel is the main castle of Uther's domain. It is also the castle in which Arthur was conceived.

Bryn Myrddin

Bryn Myrddin is the cave that Merlin calls home. Merlin returns to his home whenever he needs to replenish his health and wait for another sign.

Caer Bannog

Caer Bannog is a ruined castle in the middle of a lake. Merlin hides the sword there, and Arthur later discovers it when hunting a stag.

Mascen's Tower

Mascen's Tower is an old ruin where Merlin finds Maximus' sword. He receives visions which show him the tower's outline, and he finds the sword in a hidden compartment.

The Green Chapel

The Green Chapel is one of the names for the sanctuary Merlin finds. It is also the place where Arthur unsheathes the sword from the stone-like wrapping.

Holy Shrines

Many of the commoners in England still pay heed to the holy shrines. One inspires Merlin to veer off the path he is taking to Arthur in order to search for the mythical sword.

Caliburn

Caliburn is the mythical sword used by Magnus Maximus. Merlin sees the sword in his dreams and knows that it will one day be Arthur's.



Uther's Sword

Uther gives his sword to Arthur to finish the battle against the Saxons. When he presents the sword to Arthur at the dinner, it breaks at the hilt.

Merlin's Harp

King Hoel gives Merlin a harp that was once his. It scared off a group of spies from Bryn Myrrdin because the wind hit its strings and created a few notes of music on its own.

Disguises

Merlin is a master of disguises. He gives Uther a disguise to sleep with Ygraine, and he also uses disguises when travelling over England.



Themes

New Religion vs. Old Religion

Around the 5th century, England began to have a major upheaval of its culture. This was caused by the spread of Christianity around the world. The nobles and royals began to follow Christianity (some by faith, others by selfishness). However, the Roman gods and goddesses were still prevalent in many of the smaller regions and towns in England. The commoners still worshipped shrines and gave their tithes and blessings to whichever deity they believed watched over their town.

In The Hollow Hills, many of Merlin's encounters with people result in their profession of their religious beliefs. Even at Bryn Myrrdin, people still leave food and coins as a tithe to their god. The people think that Merlin is their god incarnate, so they begin to worship him as well. Most of the nobles, though, claim Christianity as their faith. Ygraine is determined to have Arthur baptized and raised as a Christian.

What makes this theme so important, though, is that Arthur is a symbol of the Christ figure. He was born on Christmas Eve, ambiguously referred to as the "Christmas King," and prophecies said he will bring peace and prosperity to the land. These are the same prophecies that were said about Jesus a few hundred years earlier.

Illegitimacy

There is a steady theme of illegitimacy throughout the novel. It begins with Merlin's admission that he was the illegitimate son of King Ambrosius. Merlin was lucky, though, because his father loved him and made sure Merlin received the best care and schooling. He also publicly received his son even though Merlin could never take the throne. Uther felt the same way toward Morgause, his eldest daughter born to him by a common woman he met.

It is because of Merlin's illegitimacy that he can feel complete empathy for Arthur. He was grateful that Ambrosius acknowledged him publicly, but Arthur's parentage was kept secret from him in case Uther produced a more legitimate heir. However, this turns around to hurt Arthur when he impregnates Morgause before realizing that she is his sister. Merlin foretells that this act will be Arthur's downfall as their son Mordred will one day mortally wound Arthur.

Stories and Rumors

At the center of the Merlin and Arthur myth are the wild stories and rumors that surround them. Merlin addresses these head-on in his narration and dialogue; according to the stories, Merlin came to Uther, cured him, and then flew away on a dragon. He was also said to have taken Arthur to a mysterious boat or island and held him there as a child.



Another was that he disguised Arthur as a pack mule and brought him on his adventures.

For Merlin, these rumors were a part of every-day occurrences. At times, he saw them as a nuisance. However, there were times when he knew that they served him and his purpose well. As for Arthur's whereabouts, he was glad that so many people, even Arthur, thought the mysterious Pendragon heir was anywhere but Count Ector's house.



Style

Point of View

The Hollow Hills is told from Merlin's point of view. Because Merlin is a natural observer and decent judge of character, the reader is able to see and understand events from a holistic point of view. Merlin also speaks about his visions, so the reader can see and understand Merlin's visions as he does. It is helpful for the narration of the story that Merlin is an enchanter because he is able to see certain events that do not take place around him. By looking into fire, he was able to watch Arthur grow up. He also saw bad events, like Arthur's group getting attacked and Arthur bedding his older sister.

His vision is not all-inclusive, though, as he cannot see other events. For instance, when Arthur first finds Caliburn, he can only tell the readers what Arthur told him about the event.

Setting

The setting of The Hollow Hills is the late 5th and early 6th century in England. At the time, England was at constant war because it was separated into small factions. Uther was the High King, but each area had its own leader. Also, the Saxons were invading from the present-day French and Spanish border, so there was much unrest during Uther's reign.

England was also in the middle of a radical shift both culturally and religiously. Many of the nobility had recently turned to Christianity and cast aside the Roman deities. However, many of the common people were still clinging to their old beliefs and gods. Much of the language was beginning to change, hence Merlin's discussion of the different dialects he recognizes while travelling around England.

Language and Meaning

Merlin's narrative language is fluid and smooth. However, he uses Roman and Old English names interchangeably. For instance, Magnus Maximus is the Roman name for Macsen Wledig. Most of the time, though, Merlin refers to people by their Old English names (Ceii and Bedwyr are two examples; they are known to most modern-day English speakers as Kay and Bedivere). This is to show the significance of the time period; 5th century England saw a major change in its culture as the Britons shed their Roman ancestry and forged a new identity.

Structure

The Hollow Hills is divided into four different books: The Waiting, The Search, The Sword, and The Legend. Each of the sections clearly marks the beginning and end to a different part of Merlin's life. The Waiting describes the nine months that Merlin waits for Arthur to be born. The Search is from the time of Arthur's birth to around his ninth year when Merlin is looking for Caliburn. The Sword is the four-year period when Arthur and Merlin are finally together, and Arthur finds the sword in Caer Bannog. The King describes the last few days of Uther Pendragon's life and when Arthur is declared King of England.



Quotes

I, Merlin, son of Ambrosius, whom men feared as prophet and visionary, had been in that night's work no more than the god's instrument. (Chapter 1)

I knew that the wine and bread, like the thrown coins, had been left as much as an offering to the god as to me; in the minds of the simple folk I had already become part of the legend of the hill, their god made flesh who came and went as quietly as the air, and brought with him the gifts of healing. (Chapter 3)

Where before she had seemed young and burning, a wild bird beating her wings against the wires of the cage, now she seemed to brood, wings clipped, gravid, a creature of the ground. (Chapter 7)

The name seem strange to me, but it came like an echo of something I had heard long before. (Chapter 9)

The mist was lifting, drawing back from a sparkling sky. Faintly, high over the castle promontory grew a hazy moon of light. Then the last cloud blew clear, billowing before the west wind like a sail blowing towards Brittany, and in its wake, blazing through the sparkle of the lesser stars, grew the great star that had lit the night of Ambrosius' death and now burned steady in the east for the birth of the Christmas King. (Chapter 11)

Be sure the gods will watch over you, and you will be safe. Where safer, than right in God's hand, in his hollow hill? (Chapter 7)

The signs were simple, but messages do not always come from the gods beyond the stars. (Chapter 9)

I laid the sword still wrapped as I had found it, on the stone table. I went back across the pool. The place sang with echoes. I stood still, while they sank to a humming murmur and then died. My very breathing sounded all at once too loud, an intrusion. I left the sword to its silent waiting, and went quickly back up towards daylight. The shadows parted and let me through. (Chapter 1)

Already in this boy, they came together in the impression of a blazing but controlled vitality. (Chapter 2)

He said now, seriously, as if at nine years old he knew: 'He is the bravest companion, and the truest friend in all the world. (Chapter 4)

I pulled at it, and it came clear of the stone. It is the most beautiful sword in the world. I shall call it Caliburn. (Chapter 6)

It's my colour,' he had said, when he saw me looking. 'The white horse, the white hound, and I shall carry a white shield. Since I have no name, I shall wrong on it myself. My device will be my own, when I get it. (Chapter 1)



There, white on a white horse, the King's fighting spirit had leaped, it seemed, out of his failing body, and run ahead, like the spark on the tip of a fighting spear, straight to the heart of the Saxon forces. (Chapter 1)

What more could a man want, that he determines his own death? Every life has a death, and every light a shadow. Be content to stand in the light, and let the shadow fall where it will. (Chapter 5)

The sword was yours, and we two know it. It doesn't matter what you call yourself, my servant, cousin, father, what you will—you are Merlin, and I'm nothing without you beside me. (Chapter 11)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Describe Merlin's personality. Why does his personality suit his role as a prophet and seer?

Topic 2

Why do people consider Merlin a wizard? What does Merlin say about the rumors? Why does Merlin allow them to continue?

Topic 3

The text makes a comparison between Jesus Christ and Arthur. What are some examples of their similarities? Why is it important that Arthur is considered a Christ figure?

Topic 4

Why might Arthur have been considered an illegitimate child? Why did some people contest his claim to the Pendragon throne?

Topic 5

Why were the Britons and the Saxons fighting? How did the battles between the Britons and the Saxons cause Uther to need a male heir immediately?

Topic 6

Who did Merlin truly serve? Who were his gods? Did Merlin follow a specific religion?

Topic 7

Why were there two different kinds of religion in Britain around the 5th century? Who followed which religion? Why?

Topic 8

Mary Stewart tried to retain as much authenticity in the text as possible. What are three examples of her trying to keep the old texts alive? How do they contribute to the novel's veracity?