Idylls of the King Study Guide

Idylls of the King by Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson

BOOKRAGS

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Dedication and The Coming of Arthur

Dedication and The Coming of Arthur Summary

Tennyson dedicates the book to Prince Albert and prays that God showers him with grace and favor.

King Leodogran's only joy is his beautiful daughter, Guinevere. England is in ruin because of constant warring among its various kings. Much of the land is uninhabited and overrun by wild, dangerous beasts who even sneak into the cities and harass the residents. Leodogran's kingdom is assailed in turn by the Romans, a fellow English king named Uriel, and finally a band of heathen barbarians. Desperate, he turns to Arthur, a newly-crowned king surrounded by some controversy over his birth. Many claim that he is not King Uther's son, but an impostor who was born to ignoble parents. Arthur answers Leodogran's request. He fights off the heathen invaders and pushes back the beasts, restoring order to the kingdom. As a reward for his service, he asks for Guinevere as his wife, but Leodogran is apprehensive because of the rumors of Arthur's low birth.

He first summons three of Arthur's knights to the court. They swear that he is truly Uther's son, though he was raised by Anton, a mere knight. Still unconvinced, he summons Bellicent, the daughter of King Lot who knew Arthur when she was a child. Contrary to the knights' story, she relates a tale told to her by Bleys, Merlin's master, according to which Arthur was miraculously borne to Earth on the sea. Given such a lofty birth, she urges Leodogran not to deny Arthur Guinevere's hand. He is encouraged, but still uncertain. That night he has a dream of a king standing triumphantly in the heavens above the roiling masses and knows it to be a sign of Arthur's true kingship. When he wakes up, he sends word to Arthur that Guinevere's is his to marry. Arthur sends his most beloved knight, Lancelot, to retrieve Guinevere and they are married thereafter. Afterwards, the knights sing a song in praise of their king, professing their undying loyalty to him. An ambassador from the Romans— the "mistress of the world"— comes to demand tribute and Arthur takes a stand. He vows that no more will his people pay tribute to heathens and goes to war. Arthur is, ultimately, victorious and creates a realm over which he reigns for many years.

Dedication and The Coming of Arthur Analysis

This chapter shows the medieval obsession with ancestry and status. Though Leodogran is tremendously indebted to Arthur for his heroics, he will not give his daughter over to him until he is convinced that he is truly a king. In fact, there is not even much question that Arthur is of noble birth. The two leading candidates for Arthur's parents are Gorlois, a prince, and Anton, a knight of honorable memory. Some people whisper that Arthur was "baseborn" but there seems to be no basis for such a claim. At any rate, Arthur is certainly king de facto—he has been crowned and does, indeed, rule

his kingdom. None of this is sufficient for Leodogran. No amount of bravery, no nobility short of royalty, no political power can possibly make up for being the child of a king. Leodogran does seem to be satisfied with Bellicent's story, however, which portrays Arthur as the son of no one, not even Uther, but as a child miraculously borne in by the ocean.

Throughout this book, the reader should look for the influence of the Romantic poets. Though Tennyson himself comes sometime after their prominence, his writing style bears several traces of their influence. For example, Tennyson tends towards vivid and detailed descriptions, an example of which can already be found in Leodogran's dream. Romanticism bears a special relation to these poems because it found its origins, and its name, in the Medieval Arthurian Romances, which are the direct sources for the poems' contents.

Tennyson wrote centuries after the Arthurian stories were written in their classic form by likes of Malory, and his historical situation in Victorian England is quite obvious at times. However, he does attempt to consciously incorporate structural and stylistic elements from Medieval literature. Though the story is written in modern English, Tennyson does employ an archaic vocabulary including such words as "thou," "dost," and "brake" (as a form of the word "break"). Medieval literature often defies certain expectations a reader might have regarding what is and is not narrated. For example, a modern reader would expect a writer to narrate an exciting even like a military victory, to which medieval writers often devote no more than a single sentence. It should strike the reader, then, that Tennyson follows this convention by summarizing Arthur's war efforts in one paragraph, when many more are devoted to sorting out his ancestry.

Gareth and Lynette

Gareth and Lynette Summary

Gareth, the son of King Lot and Queen Bellicent, desires to leave home and become a knight in King Arthur's court. However, Bellicent is reluctant to let him go, fearing that she will be lonely with only her senile husband around. She allows him to go, but with the condition that he first serve in the king's kitchen for a year, thinking that this burden will scare him off. To her surprise, he eagerly accepts and sets out to Camelot. When he arrives, he is amazed by its splendor; he even wonders if it is magic. He enters the king's court and overhears him justly and generously ruling his kingdom. Finally, Gareth has his turn to speak and receives a job as a kitchen servant. Sir Kay does not trust him and from that moment on treats him meanly.

After a month, Bellicent comes to regret the vow she made Gareth take and releases him. Immediately, Gareth seeks out Arthur, tells him his true identity, and asks to be made a knight in secret, vowing to fulfill all of the duties that come with it. Arthur accepts Gareth's service and sends him on his first quest to prove his worth. A woman named Lynette is greatly troubled because four knights have besieged her sister, Lyonors. The knights are named Morning Star, Noon Sun, Evening Star, and Night. Of the four, Night is the most fearsome and the knights refuse to relent unless Lyonors marries him. Night hopes to prove his worth by defeating Lancelot in battle and, thus, Lynette hopes that Arthur will send Lancelot to help her. The court is shocked when Arthur instead awards the quest to Gareth, whom all believe to be a simple "kitchen-knave." No one is more disappointed than Lynette, who thinks that the King is showing his scorn for her. Arthur secretly sends Lancelot along with them to watch from afar and make sure Gareth is not killed or kidnapped.

Lynette and Gareth set out but are immediately stopped by Sir Kay who, angered that Gareth received the quest, attacks. Gareth skillfully defeats him, however, and they continue on their way. They quickly come upon a group of thieves attempting to murder a baron, but Gareth scatters them. Gareth hopes his actions have won the favor of Lynette, but she remains as indignant as ever, refusing even to sit by him when they stay the night at the baron's house. When they set out the next morning, Gareth skillfully defeats the first two knights but earns no respect from Lynette. It is not until he beats the third knight—a monster of a man—that she begins to esteem his valor. Her respect fades soon after, however. Lancelot arrives—for the king had ordered him to follow and ensure that Gareth is not harmed—but Gareth mistakes him for a bandit and attacks. Whereupon, defending himself, Lancelot knocks Gareth from his horse. When Lynette laughs, Lancelot rebukes her, saying that a man is only made strong through defeat.

They ride out that night and confront the fourth and final knight, Night. He wears an intimidating suit covered with bones, but Geraint quickly finds that it is only a boy inside. The bandits did not think anyone would be mighty enough to get so far. The boy runs away and Lyonors is saved. Not long after, Gareth and Lynette wed.

Gareth and Lynette Analysis

The primary theme of this story is the relationship between social status and the merit one earns through bravery. Lynette, a noble woman, is reluctant to show any respect towards Gareth at all, entirely because she thinks he is a "kitchen-knave." Even after he saves the baron from a pack of thieves which greatly outnumber him and takes down two of the bandit knights, she refuses to acknowledge his worth and instead finds ways to downplay his feats. When he takes down the third knight, she is forced to admire him, but seems almost relieved to be able to hate him again when Lancelot takes him down. As she puts it, he "tumbled back into the kitchen-knave" (63). Her attitude is not permanently changed until Lancelot tells her his entire story, including, most importantly, the fact that he is the song of King Lot. Only then does she finally regret acting so nastily towards him.

In addition to reflecting medieval social values, Lynette may also be taken to represent the medieval attitude towards women. Lynette's understanding of the social order is simplistic. Gareth can do almost nothing to redeem himself if he is in fact a "kitchen-knave." The men in the story—excepting Sir Kay—seem to have a more nuanced understanding. The Baron, for example, is happy to sit at the same table as Gareth, even after Lynette complains that he was seated with her. Lancelot, perhaps the most admirable of the knights, recognizes Gareth's worth even while he is still working as a kitchen servant and his identity has not been revealed. Lancelot's rebuke of Lynette, after his fight with Gareth, could plausibly be read in a rather misogynistic way, namely, that the only way a simple, naive woman will ever learn is by being corrected and chastised by a wise, experienced man.

One of the secondary themes of the story is the praise of humility. Considering how obviously important social status is, it is all the more significant that Gareth is willing to give up his high birth and work as a mere kitchen servant. He surely knew that he would attract the scorn of people like Sir Kay and Lynette and yet it does not deter him from his ardent desire to serve his king. In fact, one can even find a Christian metaphor lurking beneath the story (given the frequent references made to Christ in the story, this should be not surprising). Throughout the Gospel is the notion that the highest in the Kingdom of God is he who desires the least for himself. Christ gives a living example of this principle by washing the feet of his disciples. Gareth's path to becoming a knight follows this same trajectory. In order to become one of the greatest in the land—a Knight of the Round Table—he must first become one of the least, a wretched kitchen servant.

The Marriage of Geraint

The Marriage of Geraint Summary

Geraint is a prince and knight of King Arthur's court. His wife, Enid, is the daughter of Yniol, an Earl. Their love for one another is great, but becomes strained when Geraint decides to leave the king's court and return to his own dominion—beset by thieves and bandits—in order to protect his wife from hearing rumors about Guinevere and Lancelot. Their peers do not understand why he would leave the king's court and attribute it to a loss of manliness. Enid becomes greatly troubled by how her husband's reputation is being dragged through the dirt but does not have the courage to talk to him about it. One day, she thinks aloud while he is still sleeping and curses herself for not being more forthcoming with him. Her tears wake him up and he hersa her say that she is not a "true wife" to him. Not understanding their context, he thinks that she is having an affair and is weeping because she misses her lover back at Arthur's hall. He says nothing to her, but calls for her horses and orders her to put on her "meanest" dress, the same faded silk dress she wore when they first met.

The story of their marriage begins when Geraint and Guinevere meet in the woods to watch the king's hunt. A group of three people—a knight, a woman, and a dwarf—pass by and Guinevere, not recognizing the knight, sends her maiden to find out. The dwarf refuses to reveal his master's identity and sends Guinevere's maiden away with a lash of his whip. Geraint then goes and is given the same treatment. His honor wounded, and angry that the Queen's servant was treated in such a manner, Geraint vows to track down the man, find out his name, and fight him. Grateful, the Queen promises to dress his future wife "like the sun" in return for his courage. He follows them to a nearby town. On one side of the town is an old, ruined castle; on the other is a white, newly constructed one. He sees the three enter the latter.

He can find no lodging in the town, and hardly anyone will talk to him; they are too engrossed in preparations for a tournament to be held the next day hosted by someone named Sparrow-Hawk. Finally, Geraint goes into the ruined castle and finds the Earl Yniol there who offers him to stay in his meager house. Inside, he meets Enid, Yniol's beautiful daughter, whom he immediately falls in love with. He learns that Sparrow-Hawk is the man he is seeking. Sparrow-Hawk is Yniol's nephew and violently overthrows him, claiming the town and earldom as his own. The tournament that is to be held the next day. Only men are allowed to take part in it if they have the woman they love the most with them. The prize of the tournament is a golden sparrow, which the winner gives to his maiden. Sparrow-Hawk earned his nick name because he always wins the prize, seemingly uncontested. Geraint says he intends to go tomorrow and will take Enid as his maiden, whom, he announces, he wishes to marry. The disempowered earl is overjoyed upon hearing this, but Enid is so intimidated she leaves the room and is not able to sleep all night.

They arrive at the tournament the next day. The prince wields rusty weapons because such was all the earl had. Sparrow-Hawk starts to claim the prize as usual when Geraint stops him, claiming that he is the worthier man. The two fall to blows and Geraint emerges victorious. Standing over him, he gets his real name—Edyrn—and makes him promise to give Yniol his earldom back. Geraint returns, with Enid and her parents, to the castle and they prepare to set out for Arthur's hall, where they will be wed. Enid is incredibly anxious because she only owns a single faded silk dress and fears the embarrassment of being so dressed in the king's court. Her fears are allayed, for a time, when her mother finds a beautiful golden dress that had been lost when Edyrn and his men seized control of the town. However, when Geraint sees her dressed in it, he orders that she be dressed in her old silk dress. With her old clothes return her anxieties, along with puzzlement over Geraint's actions. He explains to her mother that Guinevere had promised to dress his future wife and, moreover, that he wanted to test the purity of her intentions: He wants to make sure that she is not just marrying him for the glories of the king's court, which she can demonstrate by being willing to wear humble clothes. As planned, they travel to Arthur's hall, whereupon Guinevere dresses Enid as promised, and they are married. Enid keeps her old dress as a memory of how Geraint loved her despite of it and the trouble that it caused her.

The Marriage of Geraint Analysis

More so than the previous stories, the influences of the Romantics on Tennyson can be clearly seen. In the medieval romances, Lancelot's love for Guinevere was always presented within the strict confines of etiquette, always obeying rules which prevented lovers from engaging in immoral or dishonorable behavior. As such, Lancelot's love for Guinevere was something that was always unspoken and certainly never acted upon. He grew frail and fell ill from his broken heart, longing for something he knew he could never had. In Tennyson, however, Lancelot—and Guinevere's—love is set free. Guinevere lays in bed fondly contemplating Lancelot. To the medieval mind, that Guinevere, a queen, would allow herself to even think such things would be shameful. The Romantics were greatly interested in emotions, and especially the powerful emotion of love (hence the modern usage of the word "romantic") and so it is not surprising that the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere—which shall be expanded upon further in later chapters—should be fuller here.

One marked difference between the medieval and Romantic depictions of emotion is how simply or complexly each period's understanding was. For the medieval period, a given emotion always belonged to one of several discrete genera: There was happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and so on. The Romantics were far subtler and saw the entire spectra of emotions. It is not surprising, then, that Enid's sentimental attachment to her old dress is an invention of Tennyson's, not found in the original sources. The dress embodies a wide range of emotions. First, it symbolizes Enid's feelings of inadequacy before a prince like Geraint. Along these lines, it also becomes a source of embarrassment, as she fears appearing among nobles and royalty wearing such a ragged garment. After their marriage, then, it becomes to her a symbol of his

devotion, displaying his ability to look past her mean garments and love the person behind them.

Geraint and Enid

Geraint and Enid Summary

Enid, dressed again in her old, faded dress, and Geraint set out. Angry because he (falsely) believes she is having an affair, he commands her to ride ahead of her and not to talk to him. As they ride, she struggles to find a reason for how he treats her, praying that he reveals whatever fault in her is vexing him, that she might fix it. On their path are a group of bandits hiding behind a rock who, seeing that Geraint is downcast, think he will be an easy target and make plans to kill him. Enid overhears their plan and, breaking her promise of silence, turns back and tells Geraint. He rebukes her for disobeying him, saying that even as miserable as he is, he is capable of defending himself. He fights the bandits, slays them all, and piles up their armor on their houses. They continue on their way and, once again, Enid overhears the plot of bandits who aim to attack them. Once again, she breaks her silence, turns around, and tells her husband. Again, he rebukes her, and dispatches the bandits, taking their armor with him.

They come upon a village of peasants and ask for food. Enid is not hungry, but eats out of obedience to Geraint; Geraint, for his part, eats ravenously. In repayment for their food, he gives their peasant host one of his horses. They take some lodging from the peasants and are about to sleep—separately—when the Earl of the land bursts into their room. As it turns, he is Enid's former suitor, Limours, a man who has a reputation for wildness. He invites friends over to feast and drink with theme. Privately, he talks with Enid and professes his love for her. Noting the unhappy state of her marriage, he offers to have his men take away Geraint so that they can be together. Enid says instead that he ought to have a group of his men come and take her away by force. When Limours and his party leave, Enid means to warn her husband about the attack, but he falls asleep. Instead, she arranges his armor so that it will be ready at a moment's notice, but drops a piece and wakes him up. She then tells him of the Earl's plan—leaving out her involvement—and he prepares his weapons and horses. He reiterates his command to her to remain silent, no matter what happens. As they leave, she hears the sounds of hooves and warns him, this time not by words but merely by pointing. Geraint turns upon his attackers and dispatches them once again, killing Limours. This time, however, he is wounded, but keeps it a secret from Enid. Suspecting that Limours is her—now former—lover, he taunts her and asks if she has the heart to take the armor from him. Resolved to be obedient, she stays silent.

They travel next into the territory of Earl Doorm, a man notorious for robbing visitors. Weary from his wound, Geraint collapses on the road. Enid rushes to his side to try to help him. Many people pass by, but none help; apparently, seeing a woman over her fallen husband is a common sight in Doorm's realm. Finally, the Earl himself arrives and takes them back to his palace. Enid cries over her husband and her tears wake him, but he feigns sleep to see if she truly loves him. Doorm comes in and tries to convince her that Geraint is dead so that she will marry him, but she refuses. Frustrated, he slaps her

and, upon hearing his wife scream, Geraint gets up and cuts Doorm's head off. Geraint is now convinced of his wife's honesty and vows his love and devotion to her.

They leave the castle and continue on their way until they are stopped by Edyrn, now a Knight of the Round Table. He informs them that King Arthur is on his way to Doorm to disband his kingdom and put order into the land. Geraint informs him that it has already been done. Edyrn, seeing that Enid is afraid of him, promises that he is a changed man, and attributes his newfound virtue to being beaten by Geraint. They arrive at Arthur's camp and Geraint meets with the King. The King praises Edyrn, saying how much more glorious is his service because of his past vice. Afterwards, Geraint and Enid return to Geraint's realm, fully reconciled and in love, and earn the reputation as some of the noblest and best people in the land. Geraint eventually dies in battle serving Arthur.

Geraint and Enid Analysis

This and the previous story demonstrate Tennyson's understanding of the importance of irony in Medieval literature. Medieval (and indeed, ancient) stories often rely upon a discrepancy between a character's beliefs and what is actually occurring. While sometimes this is used for humorous purpose, it is just as often not. Obviously, in the case of "The Marriage of Geraint" it is meant to create a tense and sad situation between Geraint and his wife. Irony of this kind allows for the creation of stories which follow a very structured, if formulaic, pattern. First, a complication is created (in this case, Geraint comes to believe his wife is being unfaithful) and this complication spurs the protagonist into action. Along the way, the protagonist can run into confirmations of his false belief, as Geraint believes he sees in Limours, Enid's former suitor. Finally, the falsity is exposed and everything is reconciled. The preamble to this story, which laments the mistakes men make when they labor under false beliefs, suggests that Tennyson consciously had the theme of irony explicitly in mind.

The character of Edyrn goes through an interesting transformation in these two chapters. He once was a scoundrel and traitor but seems to have, within a relatively short period of time, so redeemed himself in the king's eyes that he has become one of the elite Knights of the Round Table, Arthur's most trusted warriors. Once again, it would not be implausible to find a Christian metaphor here. The King's grant of clemency to Edyrn is not even remotely believable. As the stories have already shown people are punished, even killed, for crimes much less grave than treason yet, not only does Edyrn earn pardon from the King, he is given the opportunity to become a knight. Arthur's mercy is so extreme that is begs comparison to the Christian account of God's mercy, which is believed to be so great that even the greatest sinner can become a great saint.

Balin and Balan

Balin and Balan Summary

Two brothers, exiled from Arthur's court, return and attempt to prove their worth by challenging any knight who passes by them. After Arthur comes—in secret—and defeats them, he summons them to his court and asks what they are doing there. They explain that they were trying to prove their valor and so be made knights, but they have lost all hope since they were defeated. Admiring their humility, he grants their wish. Not long after, Balan receives his first mission. One of Arthur's men was struck down, supposedly, by a wood devil to the north that is said to lurk in Sir Garlon's realm. Balan is to defeat this evil spirit.

Balin, who had hitherto relied upon his brother to guide him in virtue, obtains permission to bear the Queen's symbol on his shield so that he can always be inspired by her purity. One morning, however, he is hidden near a garden in the Hall and spies Lancelot and Guinevere acting like lovers. Balin curses himself, preferring to believe that his own wicked nature was fooling him than that the Queen would be unfaithful to Arthur. Upset, he gathers his arms and leaves the castle without telling anyone, looking for whatever adventure he might find to vent his frustrations. He winds up traveling along the same route his brother took to Pellam's realm. He stumbles across the woodsman who warns him of the devil in the woods, and mentions that some say Sir Garlon has mastered black magic that allows him to travel unseen through the woods. While he is talking, he catches a glimpse of the devil and runs, frightened, to Pellam's castle. Upon his arrival, he is immediately met with questions about the queen's symbol on his shield and he responds by praising her virtue. His praises are met with ridicule but he tries to hold back his temper. When Sir Garlon gratuitously insults her once again, however, he flies into a rage and knocks him unconscious. The soldiers of the castle rally and Balin flees into the chapel, where he finds and takes the king's relic, supposedly the spear that pierced Christ's side on the Cross.

He makes it out to the woods and is thrown on the ground when his horse trips over some wood. He ties his shield to a tree because he no longer feels worthy to bear the Queen's symbol. A maiden named Vivien approaches him and asks for his help; some wicked king, evidently, has been trying to make her marry him against her will. Balin tells her how unworthy he is for the task and mentions how he has sullied the Queen's name. Vivien laughs and, perhaps through use of some magic, knows what he saw in the garden, and claims she saw it too. His unhappiness boils over; he takes the shield and throws it into the dirt. Meanwhile, his brother, hunting for the wood devil, approaches and Balin, thinking it is someone seeking his life, attacks. Balan charges, too, thinking he has found the demon. They slay one another and, as they lay dying, Balin regrets what he has done to his brother, who was his perpetual help through life.

Balin and Balan Analysis

Aside from the two brothers killing one another, this story is more or less Tennyson's creation; the motivations and events surrounding that final moment is not in the original sources. This is not surprising because one of the primary elements is Lancelot and Guinevere's love for one another, a subject which was treated much more chastely in the older works. In this case, their infidelity is destructive, not only for those directly involved, but even for someone so remote as Balin. Guinevere is, to Balin, a symbol of virtue and grace; she is something like the Virgin Mary, even. Just thinking of her makes him more virtuous. Thus, when he realizes that she truly is engaging in what he considers a shameful affair with Lancelot, he despairs and loses any hope for virtue. Already, he worried that the virtues of a knight might be "[b]orn with the blood" (137) and therefore completely out of his grasp. Guinevere was his only hope, and, finally, she is taken away from him.

In all of this, Balin seems to forget the beneficial influence his brother, Balan, exerts upon him. He credits Balan with saving him from his own "fury" (134) and worries that when his brother is gone he will be unable to live up the Arthurian code of virtue. When Balan leaves on his quest, Balin uses Guinevere's memory instead of Balan's to guide him, though it is not clear why this would be so. It might be that Tennyson is trying to undermine the assumption that royalty is always virtuous. Balin may have simply assumed Guinevere, as Queen, was the purest in the land, and certainly purer than his brother. As it turns out, the reverse is true, and it winds up ruining Balin. It is significant that Balan is pierced by the same lance which pierced Christ's heart: In the way in which Balan is forgotten in favor of the Queen, one might see a kind of martyrdom.

Merlin and Vivien

Merlin and Vivien Summary

King Mark and Vivien hear a minstrel praising the virtues of Lancelot and Guinevere. He says that some men, following Lancelot's example, have decided to not love single maidens at all, because remaining virgin is more fitting for a knight. Mark is upset by the minstrel, whose words he does not believe, and asks Vivien if she is willing to go to Arthur's court and covertly expose the scandals therein. Vivien says she will, citing the hatred she has for Arthur. Her father died in a war against Arthur, and her mother died on her father's corpses; thus, Arthur left her an orphan from the moment of her birth.

She travels to Camelot and, upon seeing Guinevere, falls at her knees in tears. She says that her parents were killed in war, not against, but for Arthur and that King Mark is trying to force her to marry him. She pleads that Guinevere give her refuge. Vivien stays among the Queen's damsels for some time and immerses herself into the gossip circles, both receiving and creating rumors. When her work is done, she leaves Arthur's court. While there, she developed a deep hatred for the knights, because they whispered among themselves about how she once tried to flirt—unsuccessfully—with the King. Vivien's effort then shift.

Vivien decides to devote her efforts instead to wooing Merlin, the most famous man of the times. Merlin had fallen into a dark melancholy by reflecting on the evil of the world and Vivien thought she could gain his favor by cheering him up. She really wanted to learn one of his magical spells, which had the power to imprison its victim in a walled room only they could see. The victim could henceforth be seen only by whoever cast the spell. She hoped to cast this spell on Merlin and thus establish her own greatness by imprisoning the greatest in the realm. She spends hours with the wizard, cajoling him with flattery and caresses. Merlin sees through her actions, though, and asks what she wants. She says she wants to know the spell, but only as a sign of his trust for her. When he refuses, Vivien tries a different tactic: anger. She says she will find out the spell one way or another, and when she does, she might use it against him when she remembers how he is treating her. When she accuses him of using the spell to trap women for his own use, he is reminded of the spell's origin. In a kingdom that existed long before Arthur's time, a king took a woman for his bride who was so beautiful that men from all over sought her, even waging war to get her. The king, exasperated, seeks out some wizard who can provide a spell that will make her only his, an inaccessible to the rest of the world. Thus, after a long search, the spell was born and written down into a book. That book found its way eventually into Merlin's hand. Vivien, encouraged, says she will find the book and learn it from there. He explains that the language it is written in will be totally unintelligible to her.

He repeats that it is best that she not learn, for even if she does as she promised, and does not use it against him, she might use it against one of the Knights of the Round Table, who speak ill of her. Infuriated, she rails against their virtues, but Merlin is ever

ready to defend them. Frustrated by her slander, Merlin mumbles to himself about how she casts doubt on their virtue because she sees the same sin in herself. Some of the words he says are audible and she hears him say the word "harlot." She flies into a fit of anger and despair, saying that no more can there be love between them and that, if she truly planned to use the spell against him, asks heaven to strike her with a lightning bolt. Immediately after, lightning strikes a branch nearby and, afraid, she clings to Merlin. Feeling sympathy for her, he decides to tell her the spell and falls asleep. Immediately, she casts it on him and leaves.

Merlin and Vivien Analysis

This story's major theme is the power women have over the minds and actions of men. While perhaps this power could be used for good, so far in the stories, it has not. The person of Guinevere exercises a great power over the heart of Balin in "Balin and Balan" and, of course, her vice winds up ruining Balin. In Vivien's case, however, her corruption is not incidental, as in the case of Guinevere, but intentional and malicious. She has two aims in this story. First, she hopes to expose all of the scandals that lurk in Camelot's halls. This goal takes on a more complex character in Tennyson's retelling of the Arthurian tells. After all, there is some substance to what Vivien hopes to do; Lancelot and Guinevere really are engaging in a shameful affair. Those in Camelot are ignorant—perhaps even willingly—of this scandal and go on naively singing the purity and virtues of the secret lovers. When Vivien recounts to Merlin all the rumors she has heard of Arthur's knights, his denials seem rather implausible, as if he will believe anything to avoid the conclusion that a knight has done something immoral. For example, when Vivien reports the rumors that Sir Sagramore slept with a woman who was not his wife, Merlin claims that his torch went out and he slept in the wrong room by accident. While such an explanation is certainly possible, it is totally unverifiable, and is no more plausible than Vivien's more sordid explanation. Thus, in Tennyson's Camelot there is a hint of fraud: Though it is superficially pure, underneath the surface are the same sins which afflict all of mankind.

Vivien's second aim in the story is to imprison Merlin with his spell. The only motivation for this desire is pride. Perhaps she might tell King Mark, but she could certainly not let anyone in Camelot know; it would probably result in her execution. She seems satisfied just to know that she had the power to "quench" the greatest man of the times. Given how she hates the Knights of the Round Table, it is plausible to predict that she will attempt the same magic on them. It is important to note that Vivien's triumph is not only, or even primarily, a matter of simply having the power to cast the spell on Merlin. The real triumph is that she is able to seduce and manipulate him into telling her. Excluding Arthur—whom she already unsuccessfully attempted to seduce—Merlin is the least corruptible in all of the realm and, thus, makes her victory all the more rewarding. Vivien's character suggests the character of Eve, who corrupted the sinless first man into sin. Merlin himself makes this parallel: "Yea, if ye talk of trust I tell you this, / Too much I trusted when I told you that, / And stirred this vice in you which ruined man / Through woman the first hour . . ." (165).

Lancelot and Elaine

Lancelot and Elaine Summary

Elaine cherishes Lancelot's shield, which was entrusted to her temporarily, though she does not yet know to whom it belongs. He left the shield with her while he went to participate in Arthur's diamond tournament, named after the prize awarded to the winner. Arthur, before he became king, found a crown of nine diamonds on the corpse of a past king. When he became king, he judged that the diamonds were not his personal property, but belonged to the kingdom as a whole. He took the diamonds from the crown and gave away one each year to whomever won his tournament. Eight already have been given away—all to Lancelot—and only the ninth and largest remains. Lancelot hopes to give the diamonds as a gift to his beloved Guinevere. He and Arthur visit her and she tells them that she is too sick to attend the tournament. Lancelot misinterprets her words and thinks that she wants him to not take part in the tournament, and so he announces that he does not plan to fight. When Arthur leaves, she asks why he is not participating and he realizes he misunderstood her. She tells him that he should take part in the tournament, but anonymously; his name strikes too much fear into the hearts of his opponents, and so he will be truly tested if they think him to be just another knight.

Lancelot rides off and winds up at the Castle Astolat, where the Lord of Astolat, his two sons—Sir Torre and Sir Lavaine—and his beautiful, young daughter Elaine live. Not revealing his identity, he asks if he can borrow a blank shield. Realizing that he is a man of some stature, they agree, and he gives Elaine charge of his shield while he is away. Elaine, entranced by Lancelot, asks him to wear her sleeve on his helmet, a customary sign of one's love for a woman. Lancelot hesitates at first—for he never wore the sign of any woman before—but finally agrees. Lavaine decides to participate in the tournament, too, though young and inexperienced, and the two ride out. Since it is late, they stop at the lodging of a holy hermit and set out for Camelot the next day. The people are amazed at the skill of Lancelot, though they do not know who he is. Lancelot's people are incensed that this newcomer seems to not only equal Lancelot's skill, but surpass it, and they strike him down, wounding his side with a spear. Lavaine takes Lancelot to the hermit, who tends to his wounds.

Arthur, concerned that the tournament's winner has not claimed his prize, charges Sir Gawain, a man of dubious character, to find the anonymous knight and give him the diamond. Gawain goes reluctantly and happily hands the diamond off to Elaine when he realizes that she is Lancelot's supposed lover. He returns to Arthur with news that the knight was Lancelot, but is rebuked for not delivering the diamond personally. Meanwhile, Elaine, eager to see Lancelot again, tracks him down to the hermit's cave and nurses him back to health over a few weeks. Though first convinced that he returned her love, she gradually realizes he does not. They return to Astalot and, despite her best efforts to win him, he can only offer to give her future husband a vast tract of land. Elaine is heartbroken and her father thinks that if Lancelot is rude to her, it

may change her mind. Thus, Lancelot leaves the next day without saying a word to her. The scheme has the opposite effect and she falls so ill from heartbreak that she dies. Her father, obeying her last wishes, sets a letter in her hand and sends her on a barge down the river towards Camelot.

Lancelot returns to Camelot and tries to give the diamonds to Guinevere. Guinevere, however, is devastated because he wore the sign of another woman on his helmet. Lancelot tries to explain that it was nothing meaningful to him, but she will not listen. She snatches the diamonds from his hand and throws them in the river. Not long after, Elaine's barge passes by and Arthur reads the letter aloud. Elaine says that her unrequited love for Lancelot, aggravated by his unkind departure, was the cause of her death and asks for the women of Camelot to pray for her soul. Guinevere, realizing that Lancelot did not love Elaine, reconciles with him. The reconciliation is little consolation to Lancelot, however, as he knows he can never really have Guinevere. He wallows in pain, not knowing that he will die a holy death.

Lancelot and Elaine Analysis

In this story's treatment of romantic love, one can clearly see Tennyson's debt to the Romantic writers. Romanticism emphasized—perhaps exaggerated—the enormity of emotions in general, but especially the feeling of love. That same enormity can be seen clearly in Elaine's feelings towards Lancelot. After seeing him only briefly, she falls in love, which love deepens as she tends to his wounds. She now desires only one thing in the world, that he return his love. However, due to his strange relationship with Guinevere, he cannot fulfill her wish. Her heartbreak is so severe that it actually makes her physically ill and she dies. Of course, Tennyson's debt is both to the Romantic poets of the early 19th century and to the writers of the Medieval Romances from which Romanticism drew its primary inspiration: The cause of Elaine's death is not Tennyson's invention. By preserving, and even embellishing it, Tennyson shares the same admiration for emotion that inspired the Medieval writers and Romantics alike.

Where Tennyson—and the Romantics—breaks from the Middle Ages is in their analysis of the relationship between morality and love. For the Medieval writer, love is only true love when it is pure; it is a false, even diabolic love, which causes one to sin. Here again, Tennyson's understanding is more complex. Not only can love be at odds with virtue, sometimes virtue can even be an obstacle to love. Guinevere finds herself unable to love Arthur, ". . . but, friend, to me / He is all fault who hath no fault at all: / For who loves me must have a touch of earth; / The low sun makes the colour" (191). Tennyson is too early to disdain the institution of marriage as such, but here he certainly seems to suggests its unimportance. The fact that Guinevere is married to Arthur seems to be a mere convention, though it still retains force enough to prohibit her from realizing her love of Lancelot. Yet, the two have a kind of bond between them, which Guinevere thinks Lancelot violated by wearing Elaine's sleeve on his helmet. Lancelot seems to be talking about this undeclared bond when he speaks of "Our bond, as not the bond of man and wife, / Should have in it an absoluter trust / To make up that defect" (225).

The Holy Grail

The Holy Grail Summary

Sir Percivale, who was once one of Arthur's knights and winds up finishing his life in a monastery, tells one of his fellow monks, Ambrosius, about how many of the knights quested after the Holy Grail. The story begins with a vision his sister, a holy nun, had. Her confessor had told her the story of the Holy Grail, how it had the power to cure any illness, and how it had been brought to England but taken away into Heaven when the Earth became too evil. Though a saintly woman, she wishes to see it, hoping it will cure the sins that she believes she has. One night, her wish is granted, and she sees the grail come into window on a beam of light. She tells her brother, Percivale, of this, and he retells it to his fellow knights at Camelot who listen with fascination. Sir Galahad, one of the purest and holiest of the knights, speaks with his Percivale's sister and she tells him to see what she has seen. One day, while Arthur is away, the men receive a sign from heaven. Galahad sits on a chair, which they believe to take the life of whoever sits upon it, but instead of dying, the grail appears miraculously on a beam of light. Many of the knights, including Percivale, immediately swear that they will find it. When Arthur returns, he is angry that the men have taken the oath. First of all, it is disobedient; they are supposed to follow only his commands. Second, he prophesies that it will be a great waste and many men will wind up being distracted by other less holy pursuits and most of the men will die.

The men, bound by oath to search for a full year, head out on their quest. Percivale finds himself assaulted with a severe thirst almost immediately. Everywhere he goes and everyone he finds is of no use to him, for they all immediately crumble into dust when he touches them. Finally, he meets a holy hermit who explains that his difficulties arise from his lack of humility. Unlike Galahad, Percivale is not willing to sacrifice himself. Percivale finally quenches his thirst and not long after Galahad arrives. They attend Mass and, while Percivale sees nothing extraordinary, Galahad reports afterwards that he saw, as he always sees, the Holy Grail. Afterwards, he follow Galahad through a barely passable swamp and finally sees the Grail with his own eyes, but as a distance as it hovers over Galahad. Afterwards, he stumbles his way back to Camelot.

The other men—among those who returned alive, that is—had similar stories. Sir Bors saw the Grail when it freed him from the imprisonment of heathens. Sir Lancelot glimpsed the Grail, though veiled, at the top of an enormous tower. Many others, like Sir Gawain, wearied quickly of the quest and became interested in other things. As Arthur prophesied, most of the men never returned.

The Holy Grail Analysis

From this story, perhaps the most symbolic of the entire collection, one could draw many themes and lessons. The foremost of these seems to be the lesson the main character, Percivale, learns: humility and the closely related virtue of obedience. The reader might be surprised when Arthur, a king dedicated to the Christian faith, rebukes his knights for vowing themselves to find the Holy Grail. The Christian faith of the Middle Ages was a very structured one, and while passion certainly played a role in the spiritual life, one always had to fulfill one's worldly obligations. After all, Arthur's knights did make a vow before God that they would serve their King with unconditional devotion, and by taking a second vow to find the Grail, they are compromising their first. Arthur also seems to be a realist about his Knights. Perhaps he realizes like Ambrosius that they are" . . . like to coins, / Some true, some light . . ." (233). This is why he (correctly) predicts that the mission will not end well for most of his knights. Galahad is supernaturally lifted up into the city; three others see the grail, but each in somewhat troubling circumstances; many more die or get distracted.

In addition to disobedience, there is an element of pride in their vows to go. Percivale's sister, a holy nun, was allowed to see the Holy Grail only after lengthy and sincere prayer. There is something foolish, if masculine, about the Knight's resolve to go out into the world and hunt it down. The Holy Grail has been taken up to Heaven and it appears only in visions, according to God's grace; simply put, it has no earthly location. This is, perhaps, part of the pride which Percivale's unquenchable thirst is meant to remedy.

Pelleas and Ettarre

Pelleas and Ettarre Summary

After losing so many knights in their quest for the Holy Grail, Arthur starts replacing them. One of the replacements is a young man named Pelleas whose sincerity and devotion impress the king. He goes out one day and, while seeking refuge in the shade of trees, hears a group of women laughing and talking. When he approaches them, the head of the party, Ettarre, asks him how to get to Caerleon. They are traveling there for a tournament held by Arthur, the winner of which receives a golden coronet and a knight's sword. Pelleas is at first struck silent by Ettarre's beauty but finally leads them there. Ettarre, realizing Pelleas' feelings for her, asks if he will fight for her in the tournament, promising her love if he does so; overjoyed at the prospect, he accepts.

Pelleas wins the crown for her, but she does not honor her end of the deal. Instead, she leaves and, when he follows her, locks him outside of her fortress. He refuses to be deterred, thinking such pursuit is the price of love, and waits outside everyday for her. Annoyed by his presence, she sends out her three knights to scare him away, but he prevails over them, even when they try attacking him all at the same time. Finally, she has the knights bind him up and bring him in. Realizing how deeply her evil attitude mars her beauty, he promises that he no longer desires her and will leave her alone. Outside, he encounters Sir Gawain who makes an offer: He will borrow Pelleas' arms and horse, approach Ettarre, and tell him that he has slain him. He will then sing Pelleas' praise and make her miss him, opening up the opportunity for Pelleas to finally win her heart. Pelleas agrees, but keeps the sword he won in the tournament for himself.

Gawain enters Ettarre's castle, as planned, but Pelleas soon discovers he has not kept his word. He finds Gawain and Ettarre laying together in bed. He almost strikes them down, but realizes that killing a knight in his sleep would be cowardly and against the code he swore to uphold, and instead lays his sword across their throats and leaves. When Ettarre wakes up and finds the sword, recognizes that it is Pelleas, and casts Gawain out as a liar.

Pelleas travels back towards Caerleon, but becomes tired and sleeps at Sir Percival's monastery. He dreams of Gawain betraying King Arthur and burning down his hall and is awoken by Percival. Still half-asleep, he rebukes Percival, thinking he is Gawain, and laments thinking he is as "pure as Guinevere" (282). Percival accidentally lets Pelleas know about the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. Upset and outraged, Pelleas races to Caerleon. He is stopped by Sir Lancelot, though he does not know who he is, and tells him that he is planning to expose the secret. He and Lancelot fight and Lancelot easily beats him. Both enter Caerleon and, though he does not yet say anything, it becomes clear from his demeanor that he knows of the scandal and that it will soon be exposed.

Pelleas and Ettarre Analysis

While most of the stories so far have seemed mostly episodic and independent from one another, "Pell and Ettarre" is a reminder that Tennyson is developing an overall story. The first reminder comes at the beginning, namely, when Arthur is replacing the knights he lost on the Holy Grail expedition. The loss of these knights makes way for Sir Pelleas, a young and courageous, if somewhat rash, man. Through his troubles with Ettarre, Tennyson is able to perpetuate two story lines which, so far, have mainly been in the background. First, there is the character of Gawain. Gawain is, as it were, the bad seed among Arthur's knights. In "Lancelot and Elaine," he evokes Arthur's rarely seen anger by not strictly obeying his orders. Here, his crimes become more significant. He capitalizes on his heart-broken fellow knight to get to Ettarre (with whom, it may be assumed, he fornicates). However, this seems to be only the beginning of his villainy: Pelleas' dream foreshadows that Gawain will become an out and out traitor to Arthur's court.

Of course, Gawain's development is only a subplot within the stories. If there is a primary plot, it is certainly the illicit romance between Lancelot and Guinevere. So far, that plot line has not really been advanced. The reader learns more about their romance, rumors spread, and Arthur (perhaps) becomes suspicious, but at the end of this story it seems that Lancelot and Guinevere realize that their secret will soon be revealed in full, and fear what damage it will do to Arthur and his kingdom as a whole. In fact, Lancelot seems to have become desperate to keep it secret. It surely does not seem noble to attack the young Pelleas as he did. It can hardly be doubted that Pelleas had good intentions by coming to expose them, even if he was doing so imprudently. Lancelot, then, seems to be acting, not out of a sense of virtue, but merely self-preservation: hardly the knightly virtue one would expect from him.

The Last Tournament

The Last Tournament Summary

Arthur and Sir Lancelot discover an abandoned child in the wilderness with a ruby necklace wrapped around it. Guinevere raises the child as her own, but it dies not long after. They decide to honor the child by presenting its ruby necklace as a prize in a tournament. Before the tournament takes place, a maimed and bloodied boy arrives at the court. He was captured and beaten by the Red Knight and sent to tell Arthur of his new kingdom, which he has set up in opposition to Arthur's The red knight openly admits that his kingdom is immoral, but says it differs only in its honesty; Arthur's kingdom, he says, is just as sinful, but his subjects hide their sin. Arthur leaves Lancelot to preside over the kingdom while he leads an army to disband the traitor's kingdom.

Lancelot's mood is still darkened by the fear that his affair with Guinevere will be exposed, and he is too distracted to properly enforce the tournament's rules. Tristram, a former knight of the court, disgraced by disobeying his vows, arrives. He is married to his queen, Isolt, but recently took another wife in Bethany, also named Isolt. He is a mighty warrior and easily defeats all of his opponents. Lancelot grudgingly gives Tristram his prize and rebukes him for his infidelity. Tristram responds by pointing out Lancelot's own fidelity. The people gathered for the tournament begin to have a joyful party, but the queen, just as gloomy as Lancelot, sends them away.

Tristram runs into Dagonet, the king's fool, and bickers with him a while. Tristram continues on his way but guilt over his disloyalty to his wife, spurred on, perhaps, by Dagonet's jibes, haunts him. Finally, he arrives at the palace of King Mark, where she has been held prisoner. She is happy to see him, but only because she hates Mark more than she hates him. She has heard all of the rumors about his second wife and is, quite naturally, hurt. He does his best to reassure her of his love for her, but refuses to take a vow; vows, he say, do nothing but make the soul more wicked when they are broken. While they are talking, Mark returns from a hunt and kills Tristram.

Meanwhile, Arthur and his knights arrive at the Red Knight's castle. The Red Knight appears and shouts insults at Arthur and charges. Arthur realizes the knight is drunk and lets him fall off his horse on his own. He hopes to bring a resolution to the situation without violence, but his men are overwhelmed with rage. They fall upon the fallen Red Knight and kill him. They then storm the castle and indiscriminately kill everyone within, be they men, women, or even children. Disappointed, he returns to his hall and is shocked to see Guinevere is gone. Dagonet clings to his feet and sobs, saying he shall never make him smile again.

The Last Tournament Analysis

Tristram embodies a theme which has been hinted at in previous chapters: The unvirtuous curse the virtuous because their very existence shames them. Those who doubt Arthur's royal blood are said to do so because he contradicts their sinful natures. When Vivien tells Merlin all of the scandalous rumors she knows about Arthur's knights, he says to himself that she does so only because their virtue intimidates them. Pondering how he has ruined his life with sins, Tristram begins to curse Arthur. Though he can hardly find blame in him, except for placing such heavy vows on his knights, he finds other ways to justify himself. He returns to the old doubts about Arthur's heritage and asks how Arthur is legitimately king if he, in fact, came miraculously from the sea. He seems to take a certain amount of comfort from the fact that sin and scandal are wreaking havoc in Arthur's court, but Arthur is the conspicuous exception. In order to overcome his guilt, he feels he must find a way to bring Arthur to his level.

If Tristram is the low point of vice, then the rest of Arthur's court seems to be headed there. Guinevere, who once was an icon of purity and virtue, is now involved in an increasingly public scandal. Lancelot was the idol whom men, young and old, yearned to imitate. Now he is known to have deceived the king. Gradually, Camelot is becoming the Red Knight's anti-kingdom. Arthur no longer seems capable of disseminating his virtue among his men. When they assault the Red Knight's castle, Arthur leads with the example of mildness and mercy, but his men respond with brutality.

Guinevere

Guinevere Summary

The kingdom has fallen into chaos and Guinevere has fled to a convent at Almesbury. Sir Modred, one of Arthur's knights who had been scheming to overthrow the hing and claim the throne for himself, has seized upon the scandal between Guinevere and Lancelot and manages to cause a rift in the court's allegiances. Meanwhile, Lancelot flees the castle, and he and his men are engaged in battle with Arthur's forces. Guinevere is heartbroken to know that she is at the center of all of this strife. No one at the convent knows her true identity, and she talks to no one except a simple novice. The novice is very talkative and conversation naturally drifts to the affairs of the kingdom. The nun innocently criticizes the sins of the queen and the grief she has caused. Guinevere tries to remain calm and not show her emotions too much, but eventually cannot handle it and sends her away.

Arthur arrives at the convent and, in shame, Guinevere falls on the ground prostrate before him. He chastises her for the grief she has caused both him and the kingdom. He says that by her sin she has corrupted the entire kingdom, and he tells her that men naturally seek wives to help them practice virtue. When a woman, especially a woman in her position, sins, she drags down all around her. He vows that he has not stopped loving her, but says that they can never see one another again, for it would bring too much harm upon the kingdom for her to be raised to a place of high status again. He only hopes that they can see each other once again in Heaven.

He has defeated Lancelot and his forces; Lancelot's men killed many of his own, but Lancelot did not dare try to wound his king. However, Modred, now allied with the heathens, still remains a threat and he must ride to battle. He does not know what awaits him on the battlefield, and senses that he very well might be slain. He wishes her farewell and leaves.

Guinevere is filled with shame, although encouraged by the thought of seeing Lancelot again one day in Paradise. Therefore, she dedicates her life to penance and becomes one of the nuns. After many years, she eventually becomes Abbess. Three years later, she dies.

Guinevere Analysis

In the destruction that has issued from Guinevere and Lancelot there is suggestion of an allegory for the human soul. Arthur is the highest and noblest part of the soul: the reason is often referred to as the "ruling principle." As Arthur himself says, a woman is a man's help to virtue and fulfilling his goals a role which, one might think, is served by the passions in the soul. A virtuous soul is one which is angry at injustice and gladdened by justice; it has the correct emotional response to all that it perceives. The role of this

emotional response is to make his just actions more forceful and easier, the exact role which Arthur hopes Guinevere will plays. Of course, the passions have within them the potential to greatly harm the soul. Desire can tempt one into lust, pride can tempt one into lying, and anger can tempt one into murder. When the passions are out of order, the entire soul is thrown into chaos. Thus, when Guinevere fails to fulfill her role, as the spotless bride of Arthur, unimaginable troubles afflict the kingdom.

It is worth pondering why Tennyson mainly blames the kingdom's downfall on Guinevere's sin, when Lancelot is surely to blame also. The language reminds one of talk of the Biblical Fall. Though Adam was the one who ate the apple, Eve was the one who tempted him. Thereafter, Eden becomes the chief source of blame. Paul, for example, talks about how sin came into the world through a woman. While Adam was not sinless—as Arthur nearly seems to be—there is certainly a resemblance between the two stories which is more than coincidental. The connection becomes even more potent when one considers how, before the scandal was publicized, Queen Guinevere was treated with a reverence one might associate with the Virgin Mary, the "New Eve."

The Passing of Arthur and To The Queen

The Passing of Arthur and To The Queen Summary

Arthur sleeps in camp before it is time to continue his campaign against Modred. He ponders aloud why God has let this befall him, for he always strove to do God's will. He is visited by the ghost of Gawain—slain by Lancelot's army—which tells him that he will die the next day. Sir Bedivere tries to reassure the king and tells him to dismiss Gawain. They push Modred's forces back until they reach the ocean, whereupon the battle is engulfed by a thick mist which causes great confusion. When the mist lifts, everyone is dead except for Arthur, Sir Bedivere, and Modred. Arthur slays Modred, but not before Modred mortally wounds him. Sir Bedivere takes Arthur to a nearby chapel and tries to tend his wounds. Arthur, sensing that death is upon him, asks that Bedivere take Excalibur and throw it into the ocean. Twice Bedivere takes the sword, hides it, and returns, pretending he had done as he asked. But both times, Arthur detects the lie and sends him back. Finally, when Bedivere fulfills Arthur's request, a lightning bolt strikes through the sky and a hand reaches out of the lake and pulls the sword under. Finally, he asks Bedivere to carry him to the sea, whereupon they find a barge with three queens cloaked in black. Bedivere hands Arthur to them and watches as the ship disappears into the horizon.

Tennyson concludes the book with a message to the then-current Queen, Victoria. He urges her—and, therefore, Britain at large—to take heart and not be scared by its challenges, taking courage from Arthur's example.

The Passing of Arthur and To The Queen Analysis

In this final chapter, the Christ symbolism is undeniable. Arthur destroys the evil forces which threaten the realm, but only does so at the cost of his life. However, it is not clear that Arthur really dies. Merlin prophesied earlier that Arthur would survive a wound and continue to rule. Bedivere, the sole remaining witness, never sees Arthur die; instead he only sees him carried off into the horizon by the three queens, a departure perhaps somewhat reminiscent of Christ's ascension into Heaven. Finally, mirroring Christ's promise of a second coming, there is the promise that Arthur, too, will come again (353).

It is worth noting that the short concluding poem dedicated to the queen seems to confirm that these stories form an allegory for the soul. For Tennyson writes, ". . . accept this old imperfect tale, / New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul, / Ideal manhood closed in real man" (356). "Sense" at war with "Soul" is equivalent to the opposition between passion ("Sense") and reason ("Soul"). Of course, such a reading need not be taken to the exclusion of also seeing a Christian allegory; Tennyson very well could, and indeed seems to, have both in mind.

Characters

Arthurappears in All

Arthur's origins are uncertain, and a cause for great distress for King Leodogran, who does not want his daughter to marry someone of royal blood. According to Arthur's knights, King Uther married Gorlois's widow but died before Arthur was born. In order to save the child from the ambitious, dangerous men of King Uther's court, Merlin gave Arthur over to the care of Anton, an aged knight. This story explains the rumors some people spread that Arthur is the son either of Gorlois or Anton. According to Merlin, however, Arthur is the son of man. Rather, he and his master, Bleys, found Arthur miraculously swept to shore on the ocean. They immediately knew, by the miraculous signs which surrounded his arrival, that the child was sent to be the king.

Arthur is, among all of his subjects and friends, singularly virtuous. Not once in the stories does Arthur ever commit a sinful act. In ruling his kingdom he is just, generous, and thorough. In fact, it is on account of his seemingly perfect virtue that his wife, Guinevere, cannot love him. He does seem earthly enough to her. His knights also complain that Arthur binds them to "impossible" vows, which no one, except he, can possibly fulfill.

There are several, unmistakable parallels between Arthur and Jesus Christ throughout the story. As already mentioned, Arthur seems to be without sin; if he does sin, the story never shows it. Mirroring Judas's betrayal of Christ, Arthur winds up suffering (and possibly dying) by being betrayed by his best friend, Sir Lancelot, whose affair with Guinevere unleashes chaos on the kingdom. Arthur eventually vanquishes the evil forces that spread over his realm, but at the cost of his own life. Once again, the comparison to Christ, whose death is believed to be necessary for human salvation, is obvious. Finally, even Arthur's departure from Britain is reminiscent of Christ's ascension into the heavens. Just as Christ left Earth by ascending into the heavens, Arthur disappears into the horizon on a barge. Indeed, there is even a promise that Arthur will one day return after being wounded, just as Christ prophesied his Second Coming.

Guinevereappears in All

Guinevere is King Leodogran's beautiful daughter. Arthur first sees her when he offers his power to protect her father's kingdom and immediately falls in love with her. Arthur asks for her hand in marriage as a reward for helping the king. Leodogran is reluctant, however; he is grateful, but he is worried that Arthur is not truly of royal blood. After hearing testimony from several people and receiving a prophetic dream, Leodogran agrees and Guinevere is taken to Arthur by Sir Lancelot.

It is not clear that Guinevere ever truly loves or appreciates Arthur. Though Arthur immediately falls in love with her when he sees her, she does not even notice him. She

is unable to distinguish him from his soldiers. Later, when she is in the midst of her illicit affair with Lancelot, she remarks that his perfect virtue is an obstacle to loving him. His goodness seems to create a gulf between him and her and, while she reveres and respects him, she cannot feel passionately for him. It is perhaps because of her inability to love Arthur that Guinevere turns to Lancelot. Lancelot is, by all accounts, the best man in the realm after Arthur. He is, however, more human and his weaknesses make him accessible to Guinevere.

Guinevere has a reputation throughout the kingdom for exceptional purity. Thus, when rumor begins to spread of her affair, no one is willing to believe it. Indeed, her knights are jealous defenders of her, and are willing to go to blows to defend her honor. In time, due to the machinations of Vivien and Modred, the scandal becomes undeniable. The effect on the kingdom is unimaginable. The people, even many of the once virtuous knights, lose hope for ever being good or pure; for, if the great Queen can sin so gravely, what hope is there for them? The scandal ruins her marriage to Arthur, but he promises that he still loves her. He expresses his hope that they will one day meet again in Paradise. Guinevere then devotes her life to penance, hoping that God will forgive her.

Leodogranappears in The Coming of Arthur

Leodogran is a king whom Arthur saves from heathen armies. In return, he gives Arthur Guinevere's hand in marriage.

Merlinappears in The Coming of Arthur; Merlin and Vivien

Merlin is a wizard and scholar renowned throughout the realm for his wisdom. He, and his master Bleys, find the child Arthur on the beach and hide him until he becomes an adult and can take his throne.

Sir Lancelotappears in All

Sir Lancelot is the bravest of Arthur's knights and his closest friend. He is involved in a secret affair with Guinevere, which winds up tearing apart the kingdom. Afterwards, his army goes to war with Arthur's, but is defeated.

Bellicentappears in The Coming of Arthur; Gareth and Lynette

Bellicent is King Lot's wife and Gareth's mother. She tells King Leodogran the story of Arthur's miraculous arrival on Earth.

Garethappears in Gareth and Lynette

Gareth is a young prince who desperately wants to be a knight in King Arthur's court. After working secretly as a kitchen servant, he is knighted. On his first quest, he defeats four knights who are trapping a woman in her castle.

Sir Kayappears in Gareth and Lynette

Sir Kay is the knight in charge of the domestic necessities in Arthur's Hall. He does not like Gareth, but when they fight, Gareth defeats him.

Geraintappears in The Marriage of Geraint; Geraint and Enid

Geraint is one of King Arthur's knights. He falsely comes to believe that his wife, Enid, is having an affair, putting both through a long ordeal before the truth is exposed.

Enidappears in The Marriage of Geraint; Geraint and Enid

Enid is Geraint's husband Earl Yniol's daughter. Her family's nobility was usurped by Sparrow-Hawk but restored by Geraint, whom she afterward married.

Sir Edyrn / Sparrow-Hawkappears in The Marriage of Geraint; Geraint and Enid

Edryn, also known as Sparrow-Hawk, is the usurper of Yniol's earldom. After being defeated in a tournament by Geraint, he turns his life around and becomes one of Arthur's most virtuous knights.

Balinappears in Balin and Balan

Balin is an impetuous, quick-tempered man who winds up falling into despair when he finds out the Queen is having an affair with Lancelot.

Balanappears in Balin and Balan

Balan is Balin's brother. Of the two, he is the more virtuous and keeps Balin in line. The two brothers accidentally kill one another in the woods.

Vivienappears in Balin and Balan; Merlin and Vivien

Vivien is a woman who belongs to King Mark's court and hates Arthur because her father died fighting against him. She is integral in the plot which winds up exposing Guinevere's infidelity and overthrowing his kingship.

Elaineappears in Lancelot and Elaine

Elaine is the daughter of the Lord of Astalot who falls in love with Lancelot, but dies of heartbreak when he refuses to love her back.

Sir Gawainappears in Lancelot and Elaine; Pelleas and Ettarre; The Passing of Art

Sir Gawain is one of King Arthur's knights who is notable for his selfishness and vice. He dies in battle against Lancelot's revolting forces and, as a ghost, tells Arthur of his death.

Sir Galahadappears in The Holy Grail

Sir Galahad is a knight who is revered for his great virtue. He is supernaturally taken up into a holy city while on a quest for the Holy Grail.

Sir Percivaleappears in The Holy Grail

Sir Percivale is one of the knights who quests for the Holy Grail. However, he comes to realize he is not humble enough in his search. He lives out the rest of his life as a holy monk.

Pelleasappears in Pelleas and Ettarre

Pelleas is a young knight who fills the vacancies opened by the death of those who quested for the Holy Grail. When he finds out about Lancelot and Guinevere, he nearly exposes their secret to the entire court.

Ettarreappears in Pelleas and Ettarre

Ettarre is a beautiful woman with whom Pelleas falls in love. She turns out to be cruel and manipulative, however, and is only interested in him insofar as he can win her a prize in a tournament.

Dagonetappears in The Last Tournament

Dagonet is the fool in King Arthur's court. He rebukes Tristram for his many sins.

Tristramappears in The Last Tournament

Tristram is a disgraced knight of Arthur's court. Though married to a woman in Britain, he takes a second wife in Brittany. Upon his return, he tries to reconcile with his first wife, but is killed by her captor, King Mark.

King Markappears in Merlin and Vivien; The Last Tournament

King Mark is a wicked king who hates Arthur and aids Vivien in her desire to topple his kingship.

The Red Knightappears in The Last Tournament

As news of Guinevere's scandal begins to spread, a man known as the Red Knight sets up a kingdom which is openly immoral, claiming that the only difference between it and King Arthur's is that they are honest about their sins. Arthur disbands the Red Knight's kingdom, but his hopes of doing so peacefully are dashed when his men, contrary to his desires, massacre everyone in the Red Knight's castle.

Modredappears in Guinevere; The Passing of Arthur

Modred is a member of King Arthur's court who plots to usurp Arthur's throne. With the help of Vivien, he is able to use Guinevere's scandals to convince part of Arthur's armies to join with him. He is slain by Arthur, but delivers a fatal blow first.

Sir Bedivereappears in The Passing of Arthur

Sir Bedivere is the last loyal knight with Arthur before his death. He carries Arthur to the barge which carries him out to sea.

Objects/Places

Romeappears in The Coming of Arthur

As the story opens, the Britons have just recently fought of their Roman rulers.

The Pendragonshipappears in The Coming of Arthur

Arthur's arrival in the sea is presaged by a flying ship, shaped like a dragon, soaring through the sky.

Caerleonappears in The Marriage of Geraint

Caerleon is the site of King Arthur's halls before they move to Camelot.

Camelotappears in Merlin and Vivien

Camelot is King Arthur's castle. It is so impressive some think it is magical.

Astalotappears in Lancelot and Elaine

Astalot is the city ruled by Elaine's father.

Excaliburappears in The Passing of Arthur

Excalibur is a powerful sword Arthur received from the mysterious Lady of the Lake. Before he dies, he makes Sir Bedivere throw it into the sea.

Lancelot's Shieldappears in Lancelot and Elaine

Lancelot gives Elaine his shield while he is anonymously participating in the diamond tournament. She is in love with him and cherishes looking at it.

Holy Grailappears in The Holy Grail

The Holy Grail is the cup Christ used during the Last Supper and is thus believed to have held his blood. The knights go on a misguided quest to find it.

Golden Sparrowappears in The Marriage of Geraint

Sparrow-Hawk holds a tournament every year, the prize of which is a golden sparrow. He usually claims it by default, but Geraint contests it. They fight and Geraint emerges the victor.

Christianityappears in The Coming of Arthur

Arthur is guided by his love of Jesus Christ and his religion influences every aspect of how he rules.

Themes

Irony

In keeping with the medieval literary traditions he based this book upon, Tennyson makes heavy use of irony to motivate his stories. It should be understood that irony, in this context, simply refers to a situation in which a character acts one way under some belief which the reader knows to be false. Examples of irony abound through these stories. In "Gareth and Lynette," Lynette is disgusted by Gareth because she thinks he is a "kitchen-knave," though in reality he is a prince. In "The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid," Geraint is under the false impression that Enid is being unfaithful to him and it nearly drives them apart. In "Balin and Balan," the two brothers kill one another as the result of double irony. Balin believes Balan to be one of the men from Sir Galron's castle trying to kill him; Balan believes Balin to be the wood demon he is hunting. In "Lancelot and Elaine," Lancelot is struck down by his own men because they think he is an outsider trying to upstage Lancelot. Guinevere believes that he is being unfaithful to her because he wears the sleeve of Elaine on his helmet, when in fact he does not love her at all. Finally, in "Guinevere," Guinevere's nun companion talks to her at length about the queen's sin, not knowing that she is talking to the queen herself.

As literature was not a highly developed art during the Middle Ages, readers will often note that writers often seem to rely upon pretty simple formulas. One of the most basic of these involves the creation of some complication or problem and the subsequent attempts of the protagonist to resolve it, usually successfully. It can be easily seen that irony fits directly into this mold: The complication is created when the protagonist comes into his false belief. Thereafter follow the consequences of his ignorance. Finally, the story is resolved (for good or bad) when he realizes his mistake.

Christian Symbolism

While it would probably be excessive to consider the entire collection of stories a Christian allegory, one can certainly find many examples of Tennyson drawing parallels with important Biblical figures. Merlin, for example, suggests that Vivien is like Eve: "Yea, if ye talk of trust I tell you this, / Too much I trusted when I told you that, / And stirred this vice in you which ruined man / Through woman the first hour . . ." (165) Vivien's behavior by itself merits this comparison, for she plays the role of temptress to a man of unimpeachable character which is, of course, the most well-known crime of Eve. Balan, the unfortunate brother of the reckless Balin, has some similarities with the character of Christ. Like Christ, he is virtuous, but unassuming, even forgotten. Balin depends upon him to stay virtuous, but when he leaves on his quest (significantly, perhaps, to slay a demon), he turns instead to Guinevere, who winds up failing him. Of course, it is no coincidence that he winds up being slain by the spear which (supposedly) pierced Christ's side.

Of all of the story's characters, Arthur is the one most surrounded by religious symbolism. In particular, his life and actions mirror closely the story of Christ. Arthur, like Christ, is brought into the world through miraculous means. He lives a life of utmost purity and dies saving his realm from the evil which threatens it. However, in imitation of Christ's promise to return to the Earth, Arthur departs Britain surrounded by the prophecy that he will come again.

Arthur's Court as an Allegory for the Human Soul

A popular theme among the Romantic writers, who greatly influenced Tennyson's writing, was the conflict that arose between reason and emotion. It would be plausible to see the primary storyline of the "Idylls" as an allegory for this interaction. According to this reading, Arthur represents reason, often called the "ruling principle" in the human soul, a fitting title for a king. The role of reason—ideally—is to judge what the person ought to do and what he ought to avoid; in other words, like a king issues commands to his subjects, so reason issues commands to the body. When Arthur is newly king of his realm, he realizes that he wants a wife so that he will have someone to help him rule. Guinevere, then, represents the passions, which, if in proper accord, aid reason by making the person act with more force and purpose. For example, a person who wants to destroy some villain will be much more effective if he is angry.

Of course, the concord in Arthur's court turns out to be illusory, and when the scandal becomes well-known, chaos breaks out into the kingdom. This can be taken as representative of the chaos that ensues in the soul when emotion no longer follows reason, just as Guinevere failed to stay loyal to Arthur. Emotion tempts the will away from doing what is good and instead doing what is pleasurable. The person becomes angry at people who do not deserve anger. They desire sex outside of the recognized social norms and become lustful.

Lest this interpretation seem gratuitous, in his final chapter to the queen, Tennyson seems to endorse it: ". . . But thou, my Queen, / Not for itself, but through thy living love / For one to whom I made it o'er his grave / Sacred, accept this old imperfect tale, / New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul, / Ideal manhood closed in real man, / Rather than that gray king, whose name, a ghost, / Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak, / And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still . . ." (356).

Style

Point of View

The stories are all narrated from the third-person perspective. Usually, this perspective does not display omniscience. For example, in the opening chapter, "The Coming of Arthur," the narrator does not settle the controversy over Arthur's birth. However, the perspective is also not generally constrained to a single character. Thus, in "Geraint and Enid," the reader has access to the thoughts and anxieties of both of the eponymous characters. Such a shared perspective fits Tennyson's affected penchant for irony, as it allows him to easily juxtapose how two characters, each laboring under a different belief, understands a situation, thereby emphasizing the mistake of the one with the false belief.

That said, some of the stories do certainly follow different characters, and a protagonist, or pair of protagonists, could easily be named for each of the stories. Thus, while Arthur might be named the main character of the overall plot, he often is only in the background of the story, as in "The Holy Grail." In fact, the protagonist in many of the stories is someone who winds up having only a small plot in the overall story; often, they are never heard of again, as is the case with Pelleas from "Pelleas and Ettarre."

Setting

The book is set in Britain sometime during the Feudal period. The feudalism of the era, however, is largely invisible, for hardly any of the characters are not nobility, and almost all are the utmost nobles. Occasionally, such as in "The Marriage of Geraint," peasants will factor, briefly, into the story, but such is the exception. The Arthurian tales were imagined in a time when nobles and landowners were thought of like gods, and garnered the admiration of all. No one wanted to hear about peasant life, for they either lived it or thought themselves above it. It was much more interesting to hear the (greatly romanticized) affairs of the rich and powerful. As Tennyson draws his inspiration directly from these Medieval sources, it should be no discredit to him that he transmit that same fascination.

While some of the places mentioned in the stories are real, or were once real, details are so scarce and often fantastic that the reader might as well imagine that it is an entirely fictional part of Britain. It is, however, important to remember that Arthur is a British hero. As Tennyson's post-script to the Queen shows, Britons, even in the nineteenth century, could draw some strength from the legend that is the closest thing to a truly British mythology

Language and Meaning

Tennyson's word choice and sentence construction are intentionally chosen to make his writing seem as authentically medieval as possible. His vocabulary includes many archaic words, such as "doth," "longest," and "defileth" and also many words which, while not completely obsolete, seem decidedly old-fashioned, like "mere," "tarn," and "guerdon." Of course, it is worth noting that this imitation is largely artificial. Most of the medieval tales Tennyson bases his poems upon were written in non-English languages, like French, or written in Middle English, which would be all but unintelligible to a modern reader. Tennyson chooses to compromise between authenticity and utility, choosing a diction that gives the impression of being old yet maintains perfect readability.

Tennyson's sentence structure is reminiscent both of the medieval poets and the more recent Romantic poets. Verbs, subjects, and objects are shifted around, it seems, almost at whim, and sentence structures often become quite complex. Thus speaks Vivien to Balin: "Hither, boy—and mark me well. / Dost thou remember at Caerleon once — / A year ago—nay, then I love thee not— / Ay, thou rememberest well—one summer dawn— / By the great tower—Caerleon upon Usk— / Nay, truly we were hidden: this fair lord, / The flower of all their vestal knighthood, knelt / In amorous homage—knelt—what else?—O ay / Knelt, and drew down from out his night-black hair / And mumbled that white hand whose ringed caress / Had wandered from her own King's golden head, / And lost itself in darkness, till she cried . . ." (149). Clauses interrupt each other chaotically and several strains of thought seem to run together at once. While this passage may be an extreme example, the reader would do well to read slowly and carefully, and not hesitate to study a difficult passage several times.

Structure

The reader will probably be struck by the fact that a similar structural pattern is found in almost all of the stories: A scene is described, the narrative goes backwards in time to describe how the original scenes came about and, upon reaching that scene, goes forward past it. For example, in "The Last Tournament," Tennyson begins by describing the beginning of the confrontation between Tristram and Dagonet. Instead of developing the confrontation, he goes back and describes how Arthur came to have the tournament, what happened in the tournament, and finally, what happened in the confrontation after the tournament. From there, the rest of the story about Tristram, King Mark, and the Red Knight is developed. A similar structure is employed in "The Marriage of Geraint," "Merlin and Vivien," "Lancelot and Elaine," and "The Holy Grail."

In order to understand the purpose of this structure, it is best to first examine the effect they have on the reader. First of all, by previewing a specific part of the chapter, Tennyson highlights and emphasizes its importance; when the narrative reaches that point again, it will stand out in the reader's mind. Thus, when Elaine admires Lancelot's shield at the beginning of "Lancelot and Elaine," it has a special poignancy when

narrated again in its full context. Second, the significance of the events which precede it chronologically are seen in the light of the event already foreshadowed. So, for example, when the story of Geraint and Enid is told—prefaced by a brief narrative of the two married—the reader understands their meeting in the context of their future marriage.

Quotes

"He laughed upon his warrior whom he loved /And honoured most. 'Thou dost not doubt me King, / So well thine arm hath wrought for me today.'/ 'Sir and my liege,' he cried, 'the fire of God / Descends upon thee in the battle-field: / I know thee for my King!' Whereat the two, / For each had warded either in the fight, / Sware on the field of death a deathless love. / And Arthur said, 'Man's word is God in / man: / Let chance what will, I trust thee to the death.'" p. 7

"'A doubtful throne is ice on summer seas. . . .'" p. 12

"And Arthur and his knighthood for a space / Were all one will, and through that strength the King / Drew in the petty princedoms under him, / Fought, and in twelve great battles overcame / The heathen hordes, and made a realm and reigned." p. 21

"'The thrall in person may be free in soul . . .'" p. 27

"'I fly no more: I allow thee for an hour. / Lion and stoat have isled together, knave, / In time of flood." p. 52

"And this was on the last year's Whitsuntide. / But Enid ever kept the faded silk, / Remembering how first he came on her, / Drest in that dress, and how he loved her in it, / And all her foolish fears about the dress, / And all his journey toward her, as himself / Had told her, and their coming to the court." pp. 97-98

"O purblind race of miserable men, / How many among us at this very hour / Do forge a life-long trouble for ourselves, / By taking true for false, or false for true; / Here, through the feeble twilight of this world / Groping, how many, until we pass and reach / That other, where we see as we are seen!" p. 99

"Thereafter, when Sir Balin entered hall, / The Lost one Found was greeted as in Heaven / With joy that blazed itself in woodland wealth / Of leaf, and gayest garlandage of flowers, / Along the walls and down the board; they sat, / And cup clashed cup; they drank and some one sang, / Sweet-voiced, a song of welcome, whereupon / Their common shout in chorus, mounting, made / Those banners of twelve battles overhead / Stir, as they stirred of old, when Arthur's host / Proclaimed him Victor, and the day was won." p. 134

"As Love, if Love is perfect, casts out fear, / So Hate, if Hate is perfect, casts out fear." p. 155

"'Arthur, my lord, Arthur, the faultless King, / That passionate perfection, my good lord — / But who can gaze upon the Sun in heaven?'" p. 190

"'O brother, I have seen this yew-tree smoke, / Spring after spring, for half a hundred years: / For never have I known the world without, / Nor ever strayed beyond the pale: but thee, / When first thou camest—such a courtesy / Spake through the limbs and in

the voice—I knew / For one of those who eat in Arthur's hall; / For good ye are and bad, and like to coins, / Some true, some light, but every one of you / Stamped with the image of the King; and now / Tell me, what drove thee from the Table Round, / My brother? was it earthly passion crost?'" p. 233

"So Gawain, looking at the villainy done, / Forbore, but in his heat and eagerness / Trembled and quivered, as the dog, withheld / A moment from the vermin that he sees / Before him, shivers, ere he springs and kills." p. 272-275

"'Vows! did you keep the vow you made to Mark / More than I mine? Lied, say ye? Nay, but learnt, / The vow that binds too strictly snaps itself— / My knighthood taught me this —ay, being snapt— / We run more counter to the soul thereof / Than had we never sworn.'" p. 308

". . . for indeed I knew / Of no more subtle master under heaven / Than is the maiden passion for a maid, / Not only to keep down the base in man, / But teach high thought, and amiable words / And courtliness, and the desire of fame, / And love of truth, and all that makes a man. / And all this throve before I wedded thee, / Believing, 'lo mine helpmate, one to feel / My purpose and rejoicing in my joy.'"p. 330

". . . But thou, my Queen, / Not for itself, but through thy living love / For one to whom I made it o'er his grave / Sacred, accept this old imperfect tale, / New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul, / Ideal manhood closed in real man, / Rather than that gray king, whose name, a ghost, / Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak, / And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still . . ." p. 356

Topics for Discussion

If Arthur was miraculously brought to the Earth, and therefore not the son of Uther, how is he a legitimate king?

What is the meaning of Leodogran's dream?

Explain the role of Christianity in Tennyson's account of the Arthurian tales.

Why is so much emphasis placed on the fact that Guinevere sinned? Why does Lancelot seem to receive less blame?

Explain the use of irony in the stories.

What is the significance of Sir Bedivere's reluctance to throw away Excalibur? Does this symbolize anything?

The final lines of the collection describe Arthur disappearing into the west. What is the religious significance of this?