The Once and Future King Short Guide

The Once and Future King by T. H. White

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Overview

White's modern retelling of the story of King Arthur and his knights presents the reader with an extremely full range of literary experiences. The Once and Future King contains entertaining comic episodes and moments of the highest tragedy; it deals with profound philosophical issues and, at the same time, offers exciting action. The principal characters—Arthur, Lancelot, Guenever, and Merlyn—are heroic, but White takes care to portray their human flaws as well as their attributes. As a result, they are believable people, with whom readers can identify.

The Once and Future King is an engrossing story and an excellent introduction to one of the most important legends in English literature. The Arthurian legend is often referred to as "the matter of Britain," and many critics consider it—along with the King James Bible and the work of Shakespeare and Milton—one of the four cornerstones of English literature and culture.

White's title, The Once and Future King, is drawn from the epitaph attributed to Arthur's tomb by the medieval English writer Sir Thomas Malory: "And many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: Hie iacet Arthurs, rex quodam, rexque futurus" (Here lies Arthur, king once and king to be).

White's use of this quotation is appropriate, because he is, in a sense, translating Malory's Morte Darthur for modem readers. Malory wrote in fifteenth-century English, a language that many readers would find difficult to understand. White's book is not strictly a translation of the Morte Darthur, however, but rather a modern retelling of the story of Arthur. White infuses the material with his own concerns and philosophy of life. In his turn, he is doing what Malory did when that author compiled the French romances of King Arthur and produced an English version.

Throughout literary history different generations have interpreted the story of King Arthur in their own ways. Historically, Arthur was probably a Briton (Celtic) warlord who fought to repulse Saxon invaders around A.D. 460; for Nennius, a church historian writing around 800, Arthur is a Christian king who carries the banner of the Blessed Virgin into battle; for the Welsh minstrels of the twelfth century, he is a mythical hero who takes on some of the attributes of their ancient Celtic gods; for Geoffrey of Monmouth, around 1140, Arthur is the High King who unites England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and who challenges Rome. The French, with their interest in royalty and courtly love, add The Round Table, and in 1190 the French author Chretien de Troyes adds the love affair of Lancelot and Guenever.

Around 1220, the Cistercian monks develop the legend of the Holy Grail. But it was Malory who turned Arthur into the King of Chivalry, and turned his legend into the foundation of English literature that it remains today.

Modern writers, too, have seen Arthur in the mirror of their own times. For example, the nineteenth-century British poet Alfred Tennyson turned Arthur into a Victorian gentleman

in his poem, "Morte d'Arthur." Thus White continues a long literary tradition when he makes Arthur confront the problems of the twentieth century. White created his Arthurian novels between 1937 and 1941, and the concern most on his mind was war. World War II was destroying Europe, and although he lived in neutral Ireland, White could not escape the fear generated by the war.

Malory wrote about his Arthur during the War of the Roses, and White finally came to believe that the central theme of the Morte Darthur was the need to find an antidote to war. In his attempt to find this antidote, Arthur examines the relationship of humankind to the animals, the workings of justice, and other philosophical questions about the nature of civilization. The tragedy of Arthur is that philosophy provides no answers. The evil in the world lives inside the hearts of those he loves best, Lancelot and Guenever, in his own heart, and, finally, in the hearts of all people.

About the Author

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Setting

The Once and Future King is set during the Dark Ages, about 1200, in England, which Arthur calls Gramarye. Most historians think the actual Arthur—if there was one—lived much earlier, probably during the fifth century. Even though White presents a great many details about life in medieval England, he intentionally mentions modern things that could not possibly have existed at the time of the story, such as cannons and top hats. He uses anachronism partially for humorous effect, but also to demonstrate that the human problems of the Dark Ages were similar to the problems of the twentieth century.

Social Sensitivity

Because White's purpose was to show the cruelty of war and the evils of humanity, there is a great deal of fighting and lopping off of heads in the book.

Additionally, White's use of cruelty to animals as a device to reveal the villainy of his evil characters may disturb some readers. Queen Morgause boils a cat in an attempt to find a magical bone, and her sons brutally betray a unicorn and sever its head. However, these actions— appearing as they do in a book that celebrates the beauties of nature— are clearly used to establish certain characters as excessively vicious and depraved.

White does exhibit considerable cultural bias against people of Celtic descent, whom he depicts as incapable of logical thought. The Scots are the villains of the story, a plot element inherited from Malory. But White makes numerous negative references to the Irish that are extraneous to the story.

The reasons for this were evidently personal. White wrote most of the novel while living in Ireland. At first he proclaimed himself Irish (his father was half-Irish), tried to learn Gaelic, and worked for acceptance in his adopted society. Unfortunately, his efforts failed.

Because of the history of English-Irish conflict, wartime Ireland feared an English invasion and held all Englishmen suspect. White was deeply hurt by what he felt was unjust treatment.

Literary Qualities

In his retelling of the Arthurian myth, White places greater emphasis than did Malory on the tragic elements of the story. White's tragic theme—the sins of the past that return to destroy the hero—gives shape to the story, and recalls the themes of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex (c.429 B.C.) and other Greek tragedies.

Because readers are already familiar with the characters and the outcome of the story, White has the freedom to break off on narrative and philosophical tangents, such as Wart's transformations, King Pellinore's pursuit of the Questing Beast, or a discussion on the nature of civilization. The narrative depth is complemented by a richness of style—the prose of White's descriptive passages, even those only peripheral to the action, has been widely praised.

One of White's surest strengths is his characterization. He makes these mythical characters come alive, and he makes them understandable human beings. The human scale of his characterizations allows him to refer irreverently to the Queen as "Jenny" or to the mighty Arthur as "Wart." He uses psychology for some of his insights into character and action, but refrains from falling into psychological jargon or letting his observations intrude on the story.

White's absolutely unique achievement, however, is his evocative descriptions of what it is like to be an animal, such as a fish or a bird. The scenes in which Merlyn turns Wart into various creatures are, for many readers, the most memorable scenes in the novel.

Years of careful observation of the natural world went into these passages.

Themes and Characters

The major character of The Once and Future King is Arthur, whom Merlyn affectionately nicknames "Wart." One of the strengths of White's novel is that it keeps its focus on Arthur; in many versions of the Arthurian legend, the major emphasis falls on Lancelot and Guenever.

White does not portray Arthur as an all-powerful legendary hero but as a good, honest person, not very clever but willing to work hard to understand the lessons Merlyn teaches him. This is most obvious in The Sword in the Stone, where Merlyn changes Wart into different animals so that the boy can learn the ways of nature. Even after Merlyn departs, Arthur must struggle in order to rule justly and keep the kingdom at peace.

Arthur's chief flaw, which helps to bring on his downfall, is his excessive goodheartedness. This trait makes him unwilling to acknowledge evil in those around him. He is deliberately blind to the evil of Queen Morgause, and will not recognize the adulterous behavior of Lancelot and Guenever. Even though Lancelot and Guenever are basically good, their actions are evil—an evil that will destroy all that Arthur has aimed for and accomplished. Yet Arthur refuses to face what is occurring.

The most delightful character in the novel is the wizard Merlyn, who "lives backward in time," remembering the future and predicting the past. Merlyn gives voice to White's philosophy and at times launches into excessively long speeches. White, however, undercuts Merlyn's preachiness. Clearly the cleverest person in the novel, Merlyn is also a bungler who forgets to tell Arthur a crucial piece of information that might save the kingdom.

Perhaps the most enigmatic character in the novel is Lancelot. Even though Lancelot is the greatest of all knights, White portrays him as cursed by an ambiguous secret flaw, an undefined darkness inside that prevents him from ever being at peace with himself. Lancelot is very conscious of his own faults.

He knows that his adultery with the Queen goes against the laws of his church, and he does not want to hurt his beloved friend Arthur. Still, he cannot not stop himself. In Lancelot's futile struggle, White portrays a basically good man torn by his failure to live up to his own standards. In many ways, Lancelot is the novel's most completely human character.

Guenever is less fully developed than either Lancelot or Arthur. Throughout his career, White had difficulty portraying women, and felt more at ease imagining the minds of animals than the mind of a woman. He wanted Guenever to appear "good," and as narrator he is always making excuses for her, but in the end she appears a little selfish. She is neither as high-minded and idealistic as Arthur nor as religious as Lancelot.

The truly evil character in the book, however, is Queen Morgause, Arthur's half-sister. She seduces the King and gives birth to Mordred, who will eventually destroy the Round Table. Since she is Arthur's half-sister, both she and Arthur commit the sin of incest, even though it is clear that Arthur does not know that they are related. But Arthur is not sinless, for he realizes that she is the wife of King Lot and knowingly commits adultery. It is ironic that he commits the same crime for which he brings Guenever and Lancelot to justice.

Morgause's evil is all the more chilling because she demands total love from her sons but offers none in return. Poisoned against Arthur, these sons—Mordred, Gareth, Gaheris, Gawaine, and Agravaine—are the King's foremost rivals.

Arthur understands that Morgause's sons have their reasons to oppose him.

In this way, White shows that people who might appear to be enemies often have understandable reasons for believing and behaving as they do.

Education is a major theme in The Once and Future King. For White, a close acquaintance with the forces of nature is fundamental to human education and its most important result, self-reliance.

At the end of the first book, when Arthur tries to pull the sword from the stone, he imagines his animal friends around him, urging him to use all his powers.

The other principal theme of the story is the quest for an antidote to war. As the story progresses, Arthur's view of the proper use of power undergoes a series of changes. He moves from the realization that "might" is not right, to the hope that might can be used for right, to the belief that might should not be used at all. Finally, he comes to believe that people should strive to reach God through a search for the Holy Grail, and that an earthly human society built on justice can at least help people to live civilized lives.

As Arthur's thinking progresses, White introduces the reader to a number of philosophical ideas. But the narrative of human tragedy overtakes the philosophizing. Arthur's father sinned when he took another man's wife and Arthur sinned when he committed adultery with his half-sister Morgause. These sins set into motion forces that inevitably destroy Arthur's dreams.

Adaptations

The first book in the tetralogy, The Sword in the Stone, was adapted to film by Walt Disney (1963). In 1960, The Once and Future King was adapted to the stage in the Broadway musical, Camelot, by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Lowe. The musical was enormously successful, and White himself saw seventy performances of it. The cast included Richard Burton, Julie Andrews, Roddy McDowell, Robert Goulet, and Robert Coote. Camelot was made into a motion picture starring Richard Harris and Vanessa Redgrave and released in 1967. It was popular in the United States in part because many in its audience saw its idealism as an echo of the idealism thought part of the Kennedy administration and thought lost with President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. The motion picture has not worn well because of the tepid presentation of its songs.

Topics for Discussion

1. Arthur's first important realization is that people in his time think that "might is right." Is this a belief confined to the Dark Ages, or do many people still think this way? Can you give any examples?

2. At one point, Arthur believes that might can be used in the cause of justice. Sir Kay objects that this is no different from "might is right." Do you agree with Sir Kay? Or are there times when people are justified in using might to enforce their ideas?

3. Merlyn says it is wrong to start a war, but it is all right to fight if the other side starts. He also says it is almost always possible to tell which side is starting a war. Do you agree that it is only legitimate to fight if someone else starts the conflict? Do you agree that it is always easy to tell who has started a war?

4. White suggests that Arthur's tragedy, in part, is that he has to pay for the sins of his father. Does this seem fair to you?

5. White also suggests that Arthur has to pay for his own sins, including the sin of incest. Was sleeping with Morgause a sin even if Arthur did not know she was his sister? Is ignorance ever a valid excuse? At what point is it a person's responsibility to know?

6. Whether or not Arthur knew he was committing incest, he was guilty of adultery when he slept with another man's wife. Is he a hypocrite to punish Guenever and Lancelot for adultery?

7. Is Arthur right or wrong to overlook the affair of Lancelot and Guenever for so long? Is this an example of his moral strength or his moral weakness?

8. Lancelot kills two of Gawaine's brothers while they are unarmed. In pursuing Lancelot, is Gawaine seeking justice or revenge? What, if anything, is the difference between justice and revenge?

9. At the very end of the story, Arthur places all of his hope in a page named Tom, who will tell his story to the world.

Arthur says, "If people could be persuaded to read and write, not just to eat and make love, there was still a chance that they might come to reason." Do you agree? Can reading and writing bring the world to reason?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The early education that Wart receives from Merlyn is intended to make him self-reliant and more aware of nature. Some of the terms that White uses seem to come from the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Read Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" (1841) and compare the ideas found in that essay with White's ideas of education.

2. White relies heavily on the Greek concept of tragedy, in which a great person is destroyed by a character flaw or a mistake made in the past. One of the most important such tragedies is Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Read this tragedy and compare it with White's Once and Future King. Note the similarities and differences in the characters of Oedipus and Arthur.

3. The Hindu concept of karma states that whatever you do—good or bad— sets events in motion that will determine what will happen to you in the future.

Look up a definition of karma and decide whether Arthur's sleeping with Morgause creates a series of causes and effects that leads to the destruction of the Round Table.

4. White uses some basic concepts of Freudian psychology to explain the behavior of Morgause's sons. Does their behavior seem understandable to you?

Given their mother's character, could they have come out differently?

5. At the end of the novel, Arthur thinks for a moment that all wars would end if people lived like geese, without political boundaries or belongings. Do you agree or disagree?

For Further Reference

Crane, John K. T. H. White. New York: Twayne, 1974. The first and still one of the most concise overviews of White's life and works. Includes a fiftypage discussion of The Once and Future King and consideration of White's other works.

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

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

Warner, Sylvia T. T. H. White: A Biography. New York: Viking Press, 1967.

The standard biography of T. H. White.

Related Titles

Although The Once and Future King is unique in White's literary works, it is related to several other books in its concern with the Matter of Britain taken in its broadest sense. His journal England Have My Bones (1936) deals with Britain, as does his novel Farewell Victoria (1960)Furthermore, the love of nature and all its creatures, which is so evident in the tetralogy, appears in many of his other works.

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