Tristan Study Guide

Tristan by Gottfried von Straßburg

Contents

Plot Summary

Gottfried von Strassburg's "Tristan and Isolde" tells the story of a knight and a queen in the Middle Ages, fated to love each other secretly as a result of a mistakenly administered love-potion. Tristan himself is technically the love-child of a pair of lovers whose embracing of the struggle and yearning that love requires clearly inspires the admiration of Gottfried. Rivalin, Tristan's father, is himself so admired by his steward that he provides Tristan with the very best education in languages, chivalric hunting and sport and music that he could offer, and the education serves Tristan so well that he is able to secure a respected place at court. Eventually it is revealed that Tristan is, in fact, the son of the king's sister, and so King Mark promises to groom him for the throne, should that be his wish.

As Tristan learns that he is the son of Rivalin, and so the rightful lord of Parmenie, he decides to avenge the murder of his father as his first duel. When another man comes into England claiming that Ireland is owed tribute from the English, Tristan's confidence inspires him to volunteer as the country's defender. In that duel, he kills the brother of the Irish queen, and the only one who can cure him of the poisoned wound he sustained, and that is how he first comes into contact with that great lady, Queen Isolde, and the beautiful daughter who bears her name. They heal him, and he comes to admire young Isolde as he is employed as her tutor, so when he returns to England, his talking about her inspires Mark that she should be his queen. Tristan returns to the country to kill its dragon, and thereby secure her for his king.

His returning as England's representative, however, makes it necessary for him to reveal his true identity, but a shard of the sword that killed the queen's brother does it for him. Isolde is furious with him for her uncle's murder, but the accidental moment of their sharing the love potion sets the whole story on a different course. From that moment on, the story revolves around the lovers' need to meet in secret, and maintain that ability while suspicion in the court is constantly growing. King Mark is constantly presented with the possibility by two power-hungry members of court, and the lovers are constantly outsmarting them. The law of probability finally makes perpetual evasion impossible, however, and their long-secret affair is discovered.

The Cave of Lovers becomes their secret haven for the best of their affair, and the lovers live in as full a state of bliss as perfect seclusion in a beautiful place allows. They desire the clearing of their names at court, however, so when the opportunity arises, they feign polite distance and convince the malleable king again of their innocence. Their welcome back at court, while enthusiastic, is not long-lived, however, and the story ends with Tristan's fleeing for his life and coming into the country of another Isolde, with whom he has hope of the first legitimate and permanent love of his life.

Forward, Introduction and Prologue

Forward, Introduction and Prologue Summary

In his forward, C. Stephen Jaeger describes the ways in which Gottfried's "Tristan and Isolde" defies modern, and even medieval, conceptions of chivalric ideals. Describing first the idea that the age of chivalry was an age of faith, Jaeger points to Gottfried's description of Isolde's ordeal. In that episode, Isolde is asked to carry a hot iron, so that if she is innocent of the crime of adultery against the king with Tristan, she will not be burned. Because she composes a vow to swear that is not technically false, but does not technically answer the question she was asked, Gottfried calls God "as pliant as a windblown sleeve". He also points to Gottfried's drawing a parallel to the Catholic Eucharist, or Holy Communion, in which the love of Tristan and Isolde is said to give life to people who read their story the same way Christ's body gives life to those who love him. The next medieval ideal that finds contradiction in Gottfried's story is that of chivalry itself, since Tristan doesn't learn to fight until he is eighteen, he is unnecessarily brutal in his first battle, and uses cunning and trickery much more than a noble, faultless knight usually would. The next idea is that society is ordered by God, so that its hierarchies and orders are beyond question. Gottfried defies that ideal in that he describes the court as being filled with schemers and intriguers, not at all worthy of their stations as leaders of society.

Jaeger turns next to an explanation of medieval categories of literature into which romances traditionally fell, and how untidily "Tristan" fits into any of them. Gottfried's style of writing was, in addition to being its own literarily, much too elegant to seem contemporary to his contemporaries. Jaeger describes the earlier works on which Gottfried drew to compose his tale, citing that of the twelfth century German Eilhart von Oberge, the Norman-French poet Beroul, and the early Celtic stories about the sorceress Queen with magic potions from which those two writers almost certainly drew their own tellings. The one to whom Gottfried gives the most credit in his excursus is the Anglo-French poet, Thomas of Brittany, who wrote for Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. He is the teller of the tale who, more than all the others, considered the act of loving, even adulterously, ennobling, even spiritualizing the act, and characterizing the king as weak, shallow and materialistic. These are all traits that find expression in Gottfried's version.

He describes the way other authors of the time strove to disappear, as if the stories happened in fact, and appear without writers. They strove to conceal any hint at a story having been lived before it was written, whereas Gottfried speaks as if it was all quite factual, and cites his references as historical documents. Their archetype was Arthurian legend, and the characters like dwarves, dragon-slaying knights, elves and damsels were constants among them. Characteristic of authors of his time, Gottfried never mentions himself by name, but it's possible that he "signs" the work in the act of starting the story with the first letter of his name. Otherwise, he is meant to be known to us only as a storyteller who understands his characters, their relationships, and the ways of the

court. Since "love service" is the term that describes the feats of daring knights performed in demonstration of their love for a damsel, and "courtly love" is only an idea, also more represented in stories than in life, Jaeger describes how love could become trivialized by becoming a courtly game, and so breaking the rules is, perhaps, how the best love stories can be told.

His next point is to demonstrate how, in Gottfried's story, love and death are parallels to each other in this story, as in so many others of the day, and suffering and love are inseparable from one another. The story of Rivalin and Blancheflor sets the lovers in a circumstance of healing in symbolism of their love. Throughout the story of Tristan and Isolde, love is both the sickness and the cure. The other expression of chivalric manners is found in Tristan's demonstration of skills in order to win the admiration of Mark's huntsmen and court. The contradiction to his chivalry is his deception of his king throughout the second half of the story, after he takes the love potion.

Jaeger concludes his Forward with an examination of Gottfried's place in literature since his writing. He is regarded as the most sophisticated writer of his time, far ahead of his contemporaries in his ability to draw both literal and symbolic meaning from his stories. He even expresses his distaste for the weaknesses he sees in other writers of the day in his chapter entitled "Literary Excursus". Gottfried's uniqueness comes in his being able both to tell a story an allegory, as in the case of his filling the details of the cave of lovers with meaning. He infuses the battles with spiritual lessons, as when Tristan is fighting Morolt and only wins when God and Justice join him, and even assigns each of his literary inspirations pagan or classical sources of inspiration, so that his symbolism even reaches out of his story into reality. His writing has both the luster of gold in its classical inspiration, and the transparency of jewels in its Christian wisdom.

In his Introduction, Francis C. Gentry comments on Jaeger's Forward stressing the uniqueness of the story, and tries to put Gottfried's work in context as a contiguous piece of literature of the day in that it as unique as the rest of the epics coming out of Germany at the time. He points to "Neibulungenlied" as an example, a story about a society rushing toward destruction while its people are aware and unable to stop it. Wolfram's "Parzival" is another, combining a life lived on earth for entirely heavenly purposes. He goes on to site several such examples of German works without peer or category.

He points to Gottfried's choice of him as a hero as particularly puzzling in light of Tristan's breaks from chivalric type. The fact of his illicit love affair with Isolde is the scandal that is most often remembered in his story, since it is the most stark contrast with other stories coming from any country at the time. All of the other, even unique German stories, idealize and grant victory to the marital love, even after trials. Here, the 2003 printing of the book misses a page, and transitions suddenly and mid-sentence to a discussion of the city of Strasbourg as the setting for Gottfried's writing as a possible indication that he wrote at the behest of a patron in that city. Gentry discusses the patrician culture of the city as an influence on the flavor of the characters in the story, and its citizens as those to whose tastes Gottfried was striving to appeal, concluding that all of those are speculations and cannot be proven.

Gottfried's Prologue follows, first in its original German, and then translated and left in poem form. He writes about the importance of praising those who bring us good things, stressing that the good qualities that are praised in people flourish, and those that receive criticism are stifled and die away. Praise, therefore, is a way of assuring virtue in society. Following the poem comes an explanation of his writing the stories he does in order to praise the quality of loving the way he most admires lovers. Instead of writing for those who love only as a way of finding and living in pleasure, which he sees as a shallow and wasteful way to live, compounding weaknesses in one's character, he writes for those who recognize that the best loves also include pain and sorrow, but are sweeter for it. He also recognizes the good it does for people who have experienced that kind of love to read deeply felt, true love stories, since they don't flinch at love's depths of pain or elation. He likewise warns that if a reader has settled in his or her loving, this story is not for them, but for noble lovers. Indeed, he says that loving truly and sacrificially is the only way to become truly noble. He closes by comparing the life and death of the lovers in the story bread to the living, making his first comparison of the lovers to Christ as represented in Holy Communion.

Forward, Introduction and Prologue Analysis

Gottfried's prologue establishes the tone in which he will tell his story, communicating his admiration for a love nobly executed. He admires that the lovers don't shy away from pain, but recognize that it is as much a part of loving as the bliss that accompanies it. He also establishes his standards for nobility of character, a theme he will revisit both as it is demonstrated by Tristan, and in moments in which Tristan departs from it. He lists affection, loyalty, constancy, honor and the willingness to be taught by love. In this way, he establishes his voice as one of admiration of the lovers, regardless of their transgression against traditional morality, since theirs is a love practiced as infidelity; as well as establishing that he regards it as a worthy and genuine love in spite of having been the result of a love potion. In fact, over the course of the story, the fact that the lovers became so as a result of Isolde's mother's love potion, and the fact that it was meant for her and the king, never diminishes the respect Gottfried pays it, nor his admiration for the ways in which they carried it out.

Rivalin and Blancheflor

Rivalin and Blancheflor Summary

Gottfried begins his telling of the story by introducing Rivalin. He is of royal blood, and lord over the land of Parmenie, and as well-mannered and educated a man as ever there was. He owes allegiance to a man named Morgan with whom he frequently exchanged attacks. Finally coming to a truce with Morgan after causing him severe casualties, Rivalin uses his year of peace to travel, which takes him to Cornwall, and the court of King Mark. There he meets King Mark's sister, Blancheflor, and the two fall in love. Their love begins with mutually agonizing pining for one another, until finally, when Rivalin is wounded in a battle with Morgan, Blancheflor is able to disguise herself as a nurse and go to him. It is then that they conceive Tristan, a fact unknown to them until later. Ultimately, when Rivalin has to return home to defend his land from Morgan, his most trusted and loyal steward, Rual li Foitenant, advises Rivalin to declare their love openly, and be formally recognized as husband and wife. No sooner is that done than Rivalin is called to battle again, and is killed in battle. Blancheflor grieves intensely, and as she is giving birth to Tristan, dies.

Rivalin and Blancheflor Analysis

This first chapter introduces the standard of a love that is both passionate and intense, valiantly practiced, and a source of pain for its participants. His descriptions of their suffering are as detailed and lingered-over as his descriptions of the moments when they are able to be together. It is evident in his writing that he savors that aspect of their experience as every bit as beautiful and validating as the moments of shared affection. Gottfried is also careful to explain the quality of these two lovers, defining both of them as beautiful, intelligent and noble in every way, in order to set Tristan's lineage in the reader's mind. Since he comes from parents of such quality, and as the product of such a love, the natural expectation of him will be of a life beautifully lived with a tremendous capacity for love. This chapter also serves to set up the reasons both for Tristan's finding a connection at court in the person of his uncle, King Mark, as well as for his going to battle with Morgan, who killed his father. The final important piece Gottfried sets up in which chapter is the faithfulness of Rual who, out of his faithful admiration for Tristan is established in the reader's mind as an equally faithful guardian of Tristan's son and his lands.

Rual Li Foitenant and The Abduction

Rual Li Foitenant and The Abduction Summary

Rivalin's faithful steward, the man whom Rivalin had appointed guardian over his lands while he was at court, also takes it upon himself out of loyalty to his lord to raise Rivalin and Blancheflor's son, Tristan. He treats him as one of his own, giving him the very best in education in languages, music, sport and everything necessary to create a truly quality gentleman. He goes so far as to have his wife retreat, as if for the seclusion of pregnancy, in order that the town and Tristan himself believe that he is their own, both to protect him from his father's enemies, and with an eye toward revealing Tristan's identity to him when he is an adult and handing over lordship to a worthy lord.

The abduction takes place when Tristan is fourteen and Rual takes his sons and Tristan to town to see the merchants, and Tristan gets involved in a game of chess with the merchants. Rual agrees to let him and his tutor Curvenal stay and finish his game, and while he plays, he so impresses the merchants with his knowledge of languages and his well-refined manners and dress that they conspire to take him away, so that they could use him in their travels to their advantage. The merchants disembark without either of the boys knowing what has happened. Tristan is devastated at the thought of being separated from his family, and knowing the grief it will cause them. Fortune smiles, however, and a terrible storm convinces the merchants that they are being punished for their crime, and they allow him back to land at Cornwall. Tristan despairs at first, and prays for God's mercy, and then walking along the road, he chances to meet some traveling missionaries. He makes up a story about having been separated unexpectedly from his hunting party that day, and asks if they can take him back to town. They are very impressed by his manners and intelligence, and agree to show him the way.

Rual Li Foitenant and The Abduction Analysis

Here Rual is fully fleshed-out as a worthy ongoing steward of Tristan's homeland. Gottfried spends time describing the care he and Floraete take to ensure that no one, particularly Rivalin's enemies have any idea that Tristan is other than their own son. They devote themselves to raising Tristan with an education that ensures his ability to rise to whatever heights in culture and leadership to which he might aspire. Since they know the culture in which they live, and the quality of the man from whom Tristan came, they raise Tristan to be a worthy lord, whom they would serve with the same faithfulness with which they served his father. Gottfried also makes clear Tristan's ability to genuinely impress everyone he meets. The singularly comprehensive education Rual has given him, as well as his ability to come up with convincing cover-stories for himself at a moment's notice set him up as a wit able to hold his own against any mind he encounters.

In the chapter telling about Tristan's abduction it is worth noting, for the sake of understanding the unique perspective on the role of the church Gottfried brings to his telling of the story, the superstitious nature of the merchants on the ship. They are already established as more simple-minded than Tristan if only in their chess-playing abilities and social sensitivity, since they have taken Tristan. Add to that their belief that the storm they encounter is punishment from God for their holding Tristan, and it appears as if Gottfried intends to characterize their faith as superstition only, and Tristan as bright enough to use their superstition to his benefit. The pilgrims he meets on the road are also people of faith, and Gottfried characterizes them as easily trusting and equally easy to impress, since Tristan does both with ease. They are also the first examples of people who go out of their ways to be helpful to Tristan just because of the quality of his manners and education.

The Hunt and The Young Musician

The Hunt and The Young Musician Summary

As Tristan is walking along with the pilgrims, they encounter some of King Mark's men out on a hunt, beginning to prep a deer to take back to court with them. Tristan parts from the pilgrims, telling them the men are those from whom he had become separated, and approaches the hunters. Here he demonstrates the formality and refinement of his skill at hunting, further demonstrating the quality of the education Rual afforded him, by showing the men how to cut apart the deer in order to preserve its best cuts, and ceremonially ride it back into court. The men are astounded, and ask him to return with them, since he should show his skill to the king. He agrees, and impresses them further by leading them in playing the horn as they ceremonially enter the court. They follow his lead at every movement and note, and King Mark and all of the court are amazed. At court, he identifies himself as Tristan from Parmenie, the son of a merchant, as he still believes himself to be, since he still does not know Rual's true role in relationship to Rivalin, his father. King Mark warms to him immediately, and asks him to be his Huntsman-in-Chief, and so Tristan's entry to court is made.

In the chapter called "The Young Musician", Tristan further astounds the members of court by demonstrating the singularity of his skill and finesse at playing every single instrument they presented to him, and speaking every language with eloquence. He begins every display by downplaying his abilities to them, keeping with his practice of veiling his truth until it is absolutely necessary that he reveal himself.

The Hunt and The Young Musician Analysis

These chapters demonstrate the foresight with which Tristan acts, always working his audience to accomplish some already-identified goal. This chapter demonstrates the care Rual has taken to raise Tristan with an education worthy of any social strata, and Tristan knows that impressing them will get him entrance at court, and so a possible reunion with his family in Parmenie, so he demonstrates his skill fully. The fact that his skills are more sophisticated than any the men who are already hunting for the court possess both demonstrates the debt Tristan owes to Rual and foreshadows the relative simplicity of manners and learning of those who make up King Mark's court.

Later, when he is demonstrating his skill at court, he volunteers his knowledge modestly, veiling it in order to keep himself from looking as if he is striving for any recognition. Gottfried never makes it clear if Tristan does this just because he doesn't want to appear to be bragging, or if he is intentionally lowering expectations so the resulting astonishment will be amplified, but throughout the story, Tristan recognizes instantly that whenever anyone is skilled in music or linguistics, his own skill will outdo them, and he uses that fact to his advantage regularly.

Recognition and Reunion

Recognition and Reunion Summary

Here Rual li Foitenant re-enters the story, having been wearing himself ragged and starving in his search for Tristan, even leaving his own sons at home while he searches. By the time he is anywhere near Tristan, his clothes are thread-bare and his frame is much diminished because of starvation, but his inherent elegance of carriage are still evident. Fortune aligned him in the same way as it did with Tristan with those two pilgrims, who recognized his description and directed him to Tintagel in Cornwall they saw him going with the hunting party. Rual finds the king's entourage leaving mass, and asks about Tristan, learning that he is now a respected member of court, and so sends word that he wants to see him. Tristan knows his father at once, and their reunion inspires a formal reception of the weary but impressive traveler. It is during that celebration that Rual tells King Mark the whole remarkable story of Blancheflor and Rivalin's son, and so reveals him as nephew of the king himself. Tristan, although taken aback, accepts the offer that comes from Mark to regard them both as fathers and close counselors, willing to help him in whatever way they can. Mark proposes that he keep Parmenie while Rual watches over it, and he regard all of Cornwall as his, as well. Mark offers to help him attain whatever chivalric glory he might wish to attain, and Tristan and Rual resume their relationship as empowered youth and comfortably wealthy and honorable elder.

Recognition and Reunion Analysis

The story of the reunion of father and son allows for a final resolution of Rual's role as Tristan's guardian, since Tristan is now restored both as ultimate lord of Parmenie and as the now privileged nephew and possible heir of the king. Since Tristan's whole life has been a demonstration of Rual's affection and generous education for him, it also assures the reader of Tristan and Rual's affection for one another, facilitating the making the heartfelt thanks from Tristan the story has demonstrated that Rual has earned at last. The resulting change in their relationship is therefore bittersweet, since now it is recognized as a choice instead of an obligation, and will almost certainly mean more separation from each other than they have ever had. It is also important to note both that Rual raised Tristan to be lord of Parmenie, although he would also have known that the court could be available to him because of his mother, and that Mark has now shifted whatever power he has to give to Tristan, in order that he might prepare him as his heir. Tristan's skill in battle must now be honed in order to round out his education as a gentleman and a knight.

Tristan's Investiture and Gottfried's Literary Excursus

Tristan's Investiture and Gottfried's Literary Excursus Summary

This chapter begins by describing in close detail the rich adornments of both Rual and Tristan, the first of several such allegorical descriptions. Here, Mettle, Affluence, Discretion, and Courtesy come together to adorn them and create the foundations of their worth. In endeavoring to tell the tale of two such worth gentlemen, Gottfried moves into a description of the poets and writers who have attempted to task before him. Hartmann of Aue earns his praise for his beauty of meaning, whereas other poets will turn worthless and false tales into stories, Aue's sharpen and refine, instead of dulling, the minds of his readers. Bligger of Steinach earns praise for the elegance of his language, Heinrich of Veldeke for his love poems, and the late Nightingale of Hagenau, a rare woman he praises for her voice. Still unable to find a worthy means of describing such a worthy character as Tristan's knighting, Gottfried prays to Helicon, asking Apollo and Camanae for inspiration in order that he have the words and eloquence to tell the story they way it deserves to be told. He asks Cassandra to help him make Tristan the worthy knight he was, but concludes that his virtues make him more worthy than Cassandra and Vulcan could make him together. Thus, attiring him with Mettle, Means, Discretion and Courtesy, Gottfried sends Tristan for his knighting.

Tristan's Investiture and Gottfried's Literary Excursus Analysis

The time Gottfried spends on the character of Tristan in this chapter is meant to establish his virtue, assuring the reader that in every way, Tristan is a worthy recipient of this honor, even to the point that Gottfried must go out of his way to find words worthy of describing so excellent a knight. He steps aside from Tristan's preparation for day to examine the ways in which other writers have described the most worthy heroes, and finds no one worthy of emulating, Tristan is such a grand figure. The fact that he stresses the perfection of Tristan's virtue even while he has told stories of his lying to get what he needs from people makes this chapter seem almost tongue-in-cheek in its exaggerated straining to find worthy words. He wants to make Tristan the quintessential chivalric knight, complete with all the trappings of poetry, perhaps even in an effort to expose the facade that poetry becomes on people and lives that are as real and flawed as the lives everyone lives, since literature and reality were, at this time, still kept quite separate.

Return and Revenge

Return and Revenge Summary

Now that Tristan knows his father, and now that he is a knight in need of proving in battle, he requests permission to return to Parmenie and investigate his lands, and ultimately to avenge his father's death at the hands of Duke Morgan of Ireland. He rides out with several knights, finding Morgan out hunting with his huntsmen, and upon introducing himself, Morgan tells him the story commonly told about his parents having had an affair, suggesting that he is merely a bastard child, and so not an heir of Parmenie. Young and passionate Tristan is enraged, and so draws his sword on him then and there, striking him hard through the skull, and again in the heart, instantly killing him. The rest of the chapter explains Tristan's resolve to leave and now uncontested Parmenie in the hands of Rual, along with its wealth, and devoting his person and service to King Mark. While they are much enriched by the gift, Rual and Floraete are heartbroken to lose their worthy son in whom they had invested so much love and attention.

Return and Revenge Analysis

Tristan demonstrates the impulsiveness of his youth for the first time in this chapter, both in flying at a nearly defenseless Morgan, who had simply defended what was his and spoken what he understood to be true, and in leaving Parmenie permanently for court. Gottfried explains that the two elements that make the whole of a man are his wealth and his person, and so he divides himself into wealth, which he gives to Rual and Floraete, and person, which he gives the court. In so doing, he takes from Rual and Floraete what had been most precious to them, and what they had groomed as watchman and lord over their homeland in service to their beloved friend. Gottfried takes the time to describe their heartbreak without giving anything like the same amount of time to talking about the worthiness of court or the good he could do there, which allows the reader to surmise that Gottfried saw the decision as selfish and short-sighted.

Morold

Morold Summary

Here enters Morold, and Tristan's first connection to Isolde's world. Morold comes into the story as the brother of the Queen of Ireland, demanding tribute from England in honor of his brother in law, King Gurmun the Gay, who had won England for himself when Mark was a small boy, and unable to meet him in battle. Now, Tristan sees the injustice in a sovereign nation being asked to pay tribute to another, and convinces the court that they should go to battle to right the wrong. They agree, on the grounds that he lead them. And so he defeats Morold in battle, striking him in the head when he is unaware, as he returns from a fall to his horse. He finishes by declaring justice restored, and chopping the head from Morold, but Tristan had already been stabbed in the shoulder by Morold's poison-tipped sword.

Morold Analysis

Tristan's victory here is significant for his country, both since they are no longer obligated to the tribute Ireland had been demanding since their last victory, and because it will allow for the separation of families the feud between the countries had caused to end. But is not a very valiant victory, since Tristan strikes the knight when his back is turned as he is returning to his horse. King Mark sends him to battle knowing he is young, but Gottfried makes a point of saying that he strikes Morold while he is remounting his horse, thereby diminishing the glory and virtue of the kill. A lack of praise for the nobility of the act is, as it was in the last chapter, so far out of character for an author who is ebullient in praise when he means it, that it must be intentional and meant to diminish the hero's act in just that way. This was Tristan's first act of chivalric violence, and so he is just learning. The fact that Gottfried allows it to be less than noble demonstrates his unconventionality for the era in allowing his heroes to be flawed, and to be dynamic, allowing for the impulsiveness of youth.

Tantris

Tantris Summary

Tristan now seriously in need of the antidote for the poison on Morold's sword, he follows the advice Morold inadvertently gave and goes to Ireland under the false name of Tristan to see if he can get the queen to treat him. He poses as a minstrel named Tantris who struck out and fell on hard times, and impresses the members of court so thoroughly with his beautiful and emotive music, even in his sad state, that word of him and his plight travels to the queen. When she meets him, she not only agrees to heal him, but asks him to stay on as tutor to her beautiful daughter, Isolde in the languages and music that he knew so well. When he finally recovers, after much time winning over the court, he claims that he has a wife at home, and appeals to the queen's respect for holy wedlock to allow him to return home.

Tantris Analysis

Tristan's first visit to Ireland establishes the family and culture from which Isolde comes, and introduces the reader to the fact of her mother's being acquainted with the making of potions. Tristan has also now made himself known and intimately trusted among the court there as Tantris, so the reader knows that if his identity as Tristan, the man who killed Morold, is ever revealed to them, the betrayal will be even more badly received than if it were deceit alone. This chapter also establishes the affection that grows up between Isolde and Tristan, as she admires his intellect and befriends him quite whole-heartedly in a way she never could have had she known right away who he was. It is the only episode that allows the reader to imagine that the two of them might have fallen in love eventually on their own, provided Isolde were ever able to forgive Tristan for killing Morgan.

The Wooing Expedition and The Dragon

The Wooing Expedition and The Dragon Summary

Returning to the court of King Mark, Tristan cannot stop himself from telling people about the astonishingly beautiful princess Isolde, and of her exquisite education. So, in spite of King Mark's pledge never to marry or father an heir, so that Tristan might inherit his kingdom, Mark decides that the lovely Isolde must become his wife. Tristan agrees to lead a party to woo her, while suspicion about him and how he gained the favor of the queen except through trickery has stirred the barons into a fervor. Mark assures him that he has the crown's protection, and he and several grumbling knights go by ship to Ireland. He tells the men who guard the port that they are merchants separated from two other ships, and offers to pay the Marshall of the Realm a mark of red gold for every day they are allowed to stay. They gain the approval of the guards, and Tristan is able to leave his waiting knights at port, ready for the moment when they may receive their queen-to-be and escort her home.

The dragon is the blight on the country of Ireland the destruction of which was to be rewarded with the hand of the lovely Princess Isolde. Tristan resolves that his must be how he wins her for his king, but coincident with his setting out after the task is the scheming of a certain Steward who had always determined that he would wait close by until some soul braver than he felled the dragon, and then kill the man and take the credit and the princess. Tristan does kill the dragon, and cuts out its tongue as proof that he was there for the dragon's end, but is so badly burned that he dives into a lake and stays there completely submerged and just able to breathe. Since he is hidden from sight, the Steward doesn't find him when he comes to see whether the dragon is indeed dead. He cuts the head from the dragon as evidence to take to the castle. Meanwhile, the Queen and Princess Isolde hear the cry and go to the scene themselves to see whether it is the dragon who made it. They investigate the scene, and cleverly discover Tristan in the lake, badly burned. They realize that he must be the true slayer of the dragon, and take him home to nurse him and as proof against the corrupt steward. When the steward indeed does make his claim for the princess, the Queen is ready with her confident retort, and the king declares that she must produce the real slayer for a duel with the steward so the matter can be settled.

The Wooing Expedition and The Dragon Analysis

This chapter about the Wooing Expedition contains the first demonstration from Mark of a less-than-admirable character. He is easily swayed by Tristan's description of Isolde to break his resolve not to marry, revealing a flexibility of resolve and absence of integrity unbecoming a king. He also gives Tristan a piece of advice that is less than sound. He tells him that "a man grows is worth as long as he is envied", mixing up the fact and its side-effect. Whereas a wise man would know that being envied is an unfortunate outgrowth of being a man of worth in his character and accomplishments, Mark

suggests that envy alone is the determiner of worth. Further, the beginnings of suspicion and grumbling against Tristan among the barons begins here, for the first time introducing the idea that any response other than admiration came from the people who knew and watched Tristan live.

The slaying of the dragon is the first genuine act of courage and skill at battle Tristan demonstrates. He accomplishes a task many other brave and skilled knights had failed to accomplish, and while his traveling companions are sitting in the ship grumbling and betting against him. His cunning serves him well in this context, too, since he is able to outsmart any possible effort at usurping his claim on victory over the dragon. This is also the first demonstration of the cunning that is is common to the women of the Irish royal family, a foreshadowing of a skill that will serve Isolde well in her years at Cornwall castle.

The Splinter and The Proof

The Splinter and The Proof Summary

In the beginning of the chapter entitled, "The Splinter", the Isoldes devote themselves to the restoration of Tristan, whom they still know as Tantris, to health following his dragon's burn. It is while Isolde is sitting at Tristan's beside that she sees among his things the fractured sword, and wonders whether the piece missing from his sword could possibly be the piece she and her mother took from her uncle's fatal wound. When she discovers that it does, she insists on vengeance, even while Tristan denies his own identity. It is only the promise for mercy Queen Isolde made to Tantris, and his unique position as rescuer of Isolde from the scoundrel steward that saves him from their wrath. It is as a part of this conversation, in which Tristan must clear his name, that he promises as a way of assuring his good will to their family that he can make Isolde the wife of a king, and so reveals the purpose of his mission. Bragnane comes into the story as a prudent adviser, approving the bargain of Tristan's promise in exchange for pardon for Morold's murder. King Gurmun accepts the reconciliation, as well, and the chapter ends with Curvenal returning to the ship with news of Tristan's victory in the task of defeating the dragon and winning the favor of the Irish court.

The chapter entitled "The Proof" tells the story of the day of the duel that would decide who was the rightful winner of the hand of Princess Isolde. Tristan dresses himself in finery worthy of the occasion, now radiantly healthy again, and the Isoldes likewise appear for the event resplendently dressed. The steward is confident, there with the head of the dragon, but the women, unmoved, so confident are they of their own hero, call for Tristan to be brought forward with his proof of victory over the dragon. He enters on the arm of the beautiful and noble Bragnane, and the knights long separated from family in Ireland while the feud between the two countries had endured. So, Tristan enters both as victor over the country's dragon, and settler of the feud, allowing for these tearful reunions. The moment of the tongue's revelation finishes the scoundrel steward's claim on the princess once and for all, and the steward leaves the court in shame.

The Splinter and The Proof Analysis

The discovery of Tristan's identity provides the context for the first moral struggle in Isolde, in which her anger and appetite for revenge against Tristan wars against her feminine grace. This chapter also provides context for further explanation of the character of the Queen who, once she has given her word, will not allow even anger to force her to break it. It is an insight into the character education the Princess Isolde would have gotten by her example. Both women are intelligent and cunning, and Tristan is able to appeal to their practicality in hopes for Isolde, and their disdain for the scoundrel to secure his forgiveness.

The end of the feud between Ireland and England is another accomplishment for Tristan by which he genuinely earns honor, allowing for the reunion of families kept away from each other. That accomplishment coupled with his slaying of Ireland's dragon create a genuine rite of passage for Tristan into full-fledged honorable manhood. He is, for the first time, worthy of a woman like Isolde in the eyes of even the most strict adherent to chivalric code.

The Love Potion, The Avowal and Bragnane

The Love Potion, The Avowal and Bragnane Summary

In preparation for sending her daughter away to marry King Mark, Queen Isolde designs a love potion for the two to drink on their wedding night, entrusting it to Bragnane to keep it secret, and administer the potion as their wedding-night toast. Bragnane agrees to the assignment, and promises her queen to watch over Isolde and her affairs all their lives. They embark for England by ship, while Isolde continues to carry her anger against Tristan, swearing that even wealth is not enough to make her happy while she endures the company of such an offender. Since the two are hot and exhausted while they sit below deck, Isolde finds the bottle of Bragnane's secret wine, and offers it as a quench to share with Tristan. Even while they are fighting, the two notice the effects of the drink within themselves.

The lovers are tormented with appetites for each other in the beginning of the chapter entitled, "The Avowal", and finally confront each other with their torment, realizing finally that their own torments are shared. Unable to conceal their amour from the watchful eyes of Bragnane, the two let her in on their secret, in order that she might guard their opportunities to meet, and so heal one another of their ache. She realizes at once that her having left the drink unguarded makes her responsible for their plight, and swears to be their faithful guardian. Gottfried lingers over the beauty of love passionately and faithfully practiced, and closes the chapter describing the felicity in which the new lovers passed the remainder of the voyage to Cornwall.

"Bragnane" is the chapter that tells about the panic that grips Isolde when she first arrives at Cornwall, and the intensity of her fear of exposure. Since Bragnane was the only person outside her and Tristan who knew of their affair, she determines to have Bragnane taken into the woods and killed. Since Bragnane is so impressive and genuine a woman, however, the men charged with the task ask her why the queen might have ordered such a thing. Bragnane remains faithful to her promise even in the face of death at Isolde's command, composing a story even in that moment of panic about a soiled garment to satisfy the men that she was faithful, and spare her lady from exposure. The men take mercy on her, and returning to find a very distraught Isolde, demanding that they produce Bragnane, since she had reconsidered the horrible deed, are able to reunite the faithful friend and her lady. From their reunion on, the two women are of one mind, with no secrets from each other, and perfectly unified in purpose.

The Love Potion, The Avowal and Bragnane Analysis

The importance of Bragnane as a character of integrity and intelligence is affirmed again when the queen entrusts the potion to her, and even when Tristan and Isolde find

it, her steadfastness remains, fastened all the more tightly for her feeling responsible that the opportunity existed. The moment of the potion's discovery does allow for the question of what Tristan and Isolde's relationship would have been had they not discovered it, however. Isolde had been fond of Tristan while he was Tantris, and he was the hero who rescued her from the scoundrel and her country from its dragon, so the possibility exists, but at the moment they drank, she was still deeply engrossed in her anger with him for the death of her uncle.

"The Avowal" allows Gottfried opportunity to linger over his descriptions of the intensity of love between Tristan and Isolde, and in so doing, he stresses the torment of the longing, and their roles as physician to each other, mirroring the image of Blancheflor as healer to Rivalin in the book's first chapter. The constancy of Bragnane's faithfulness to Isolde is an important element heading into the book's next chapter.

The only moment of panic Isolde displays in the entire book comes with her arrival in Cornwall when she orders the murder of faithful Bragnane. Almost as soon as she has issued the order, however, she reconsiders it, and the test it provides for Bragnane's ability to remain cool and faithful under threat makes their friendship all the stronger when Bragnane is restored to her.

Gandin, Marjodoc, Plot and Counterplot, and Melot

Gandin, Marjodoc, Plot and Counterplot, and Melot Summary

The next chapeter opens with descriptions of Tristan's continuing acts of valor, taking him away regularly from court, and providing a context for the arrival of a ship from Ireland bearing the baron called Gandin. He is a knight who had long admired Isolde, and is determined to win her for himself, even though she is already wed by this time to King Mark. He wears a rote, and tricks the king into promising that if he will play well, he can have anything he pleases. He plays, and pleases the king, and as his requests, asks for the hand of the young Queen Isolde. Since Mark is unable to find anyone among his knights who would face Gandin with Tristan away on a hunt, he relents and allows the knight to take Isolde away. Tristan returns to find the ship ready for its departure, and tells Gandin that he is from Ireland, too, in need of transport home. They strike the deal that if he can play music that will stop the queen's crying, he can have the finest clothes on board. The trick comes when Tristan says he has a horse large enough to ferry the queen across to the ship, and uses it as an opportunity to keep Isolde while Gandin is already on board and unable to stop him.

Marjodoc is King Mark's Steward-in-Chief, who befriends Tristan in order to get close enough to capitalize on any secret he might be able to discover, making himself close enough that he even shares sleeping quarters with Tristan, so knows when he is not in them. One night when the two lovers meet in a secret cabin, Marjodoc is able to follow the tracks Tristan leaves in the snow, and discovers the lovers as they lie together. The only thing that stops him from exposing their secret at once is his fear of Tristan's revenge on him, and so he goes to Mark and merely says that there is a rumor, thereby planting the first seed of suspicion in simple King Mark's imagination.

"Plot and Counterplot" tells the story of Mark's trying to trick Isolde into exposing herself by asking whom, were he to need to leave the country for a time, she would prefer to have watch over her. When she says Tristan is the only one worthy, his suspicions grow all the more powerful. Bragnane scolds Isolde's lack of imagination, and advises her with the counterplot of answers that will throw him off the scent in future conversations. When he asks again, Isolde feigns dismay that he may really be leaving, and cries to prove her dismay, assuring him when he asks about Tristan as her guard that she simply recognizes that he is the only one with credibility at court, although she hates him for his flattery and for killing her uncle. It is, however, her insistence that Tristan is the only worthy heir of command, and so should not be banished that rouses the king's suspicions again. The chapter closes with her telling Mark that to banish him would make him a threat to her if she were to be queen alone, while to allow him to stay would allow him to remain a guardian and asset to her.

Melot le petit of Aquitaine is a dwarf who works in league with Marjodoc and Mark to expose the lovers, implanting himself as a spy in the ladies' quarters. He sees the tenderness with which they address each other, and so persuades Mark to command Tristan not to visit the ladies' quarters for any reason, due to the presence of the rumor as a test for Tristan. Tristan adheres flawlessly to the request, and evidence of the lovers' suffering soon becomes apparent. They plot a system by which a twig floated on the water between them can signal that the coast is clear for them to meet secretly under a tree, where no one will see them. Melot follows Tristan one night straight to their secret meeting place, but is unable to identify the lady who meets him. The chapter ends with Melot's going to Tristan and trying to trick him into acknowledging that he meets Isolde at that spot, and Tristan refusing the bait.

Gandin, Marjodoc, Plot and Counterplot, and Melot Analysis

These chapters serve to characterize Tristan, Isolde and Bragnane as smarter, and always one step ahead of everyone trying to outsmart them. Gandin's trickery is no match for Tristan's cunning, and only serves to demonstrate the weakness of King Mark, who was willing to hand over his bride without contest for something as simple as a song. The league of Marjodoc, Mark and Melot is impotent against the intimacy of knowledge, communication and foresight of the most admirable minds of Tristan, Isolde and Bragnane. This part of the story only serves to acquaint the reader with the presence of suspicion and the desire to grab power from Tristan by exposing him to an obviously less-worthy King Mark. Concerning the characterization of Mark, he is made to look more and more simple and malleable every time he appears in the story, and thereby less and less kingly, while Tristan is proved repeatedly to be the smarter man.

The Assignation by the Brook, The Ordeal, Petitcreiu, and Banishment

The Assignation by the Brook, The Ordeal, Petitcreiu, and Banishment Summary

"The Assignation by the Brook" contains the episode in which Melot brings Mark and Marjodoc to the tree where Tristan and Isolde meet, in an attempt to catch the lovers in the act. Tristan discovers them, however, and stands still instead of going to her as he usually would, and so allows her to suspect enough that she looks for herself and discovers the three men's shadows in the tree. Thus, the lovers change their conversation into one about their own dismay at the rumors, once again convincing Mark that they are innocent. He accuses the dwarf of lying, and asks Isolde the next day what is troubling her. She says she is dismayed over the rumors, and that Tristan is so dismayed that he is leaving the kingdom (thereby covering Tristan's love sickness), and that he does so to remove himself as a blight on the reputation of King Mark.

In "The Ordeal", Mark is having himself and his close friends bled (something companionable and social at the time, done for health), and Tristan receives warning from Bragnane about a flour-on-the-floor trap set by Marjodoc and Melot while Mark is at matins, but leaves blood in Isolde's bed when his wound opens as he leaps over the flour. King Mark discovers the stain and another matching it in Tristan's own bed, and his suspicions inspire him to go to his advisers. They suggest an ordeal of hot irons for Isolde, and if she is not burned, she must be declared innocent once and for all. So, she devises a plan in which Tristan will disguise himself, and catch Isolde from a fall in Mark's watching, so that she can swear an oath mentioning the embrace and so escape God's judgment. Since her vow is that no man, save that "pilgrim", who is Tristan, whom Mark saw, has ever touched her, her vow is completely true, and Mark's suspicions are quieted again.

Petitcrieu is a magical dog who wears a bell whose sound makes the hearer unable to remain sad. Since Tristan and Isolde are able to see each other less and less, since exposure is becoming ever more dangerous, Tristan determines to win it from its owner, Gilan, by defeating his enemy, Urgan, and give it to Isolde as a way of easing her sadness. When Isolde realizes the bell's effect, however, she feels so unfaithful to Tristan feeling happy while he remains tormented, that she throws the bell away, thereby eliminating its magic.

Banishment comes for the lovers just when their esteem at court had reached its pinnacle, and they are finally able to let the most dangerous opportunities pass and simply embrace the longing. Since the lovers are unable to disguise their looks of love at one another, Mark observes them all, and calls them before the court to order them both banished, in order that they can live and love out of his sight. Tristan therefore orders his own men to return to Rual, retaining only Curvenal, his faithful man, and

Isolde leaves poor Bragnane at court, though it breaks both of their hearts to leave each other.

The Assignation by the Brook, The Ordeal, Petitcreiu, and Banishment Analysis

The lovers continue to be more cunning than everyone around them, but their inability to keep their love from their own eyes confirms their love even to the slow-witted Mark. In the Assignation chapter, Isolde is able to assure Mark by calling Tristan's lovesickness distress over the shame the rumors bring to Mark. The Ordeal does the most to reveal Gottfried's feelings about the lovers, and the folly of the church's disdain for the affair, since he demonstrates that even God himself wasn't sitting in judgment of them, evidenced by his sparing Isolde by being burned when she carried the hot iron. Petitcrieu serves as a Gift-of-the-Magi type testament of the lovers' regard for each other, since Tristan is willing to risk death to attain it, and Isolde is willing to endure sadness just so Tristan doesn't have to endure it alone. In Banishment, the saddest part of the departing of the lovers is that Isolde and Bragnane must be separated from one another. Otherwise, Gottfried presents it as simply a necessary and harmless change of circumstance.

The Cave of Lovers, Discovery, The Parting, and Isolde of the White Hands

The Cave of Lovers, Discovery, The Parting, and Isolde of the White Hands Summary

In the Cave of Lovers, Tristan and Isolde are as happy as they have ever been, since it is a place Gottfried describes as having been built as a cathedral to love, symbolizing and accommodating all of the best and most noble aspects of love in the ancient days when lovers had to hide from giants. They send Curvenal back to court to spread the word that the two of them returned to Ireland to assure that country of their innocence, and to assure Bragnane of their continuing love and friendship for her. Gottfried describes the freedom in which the lovers live there, and devotes a large section to describing the symbolism of the elements of the cave, describing simplicity that eliminates cunning, breadth to symbolize the power of love, height to symbolize its aspiration to the best of human behavior, the crown at its height in symbolism of virtues, and so on. He closes the chapter by describing the happy and simple life they lived together, without a need in the world.

The discovery comes when an animal Mark and his hunting party are following leads them to the lovers' cave. Tristan sees that they are coming, and so he and Isolde pose on the bed with a sword between them, so that it looks like they have remained faithful to their word, even in exile. Mark sees the sun on Isolde's face, and so puts branches over the window to keep her from burning, and thereby confirmed that someone had been to their cave and seen them thus restrained from each other.

When the lovers are invited back to Cornwall, having indeed proven themselves faithful, Gottfried suggests that Mark's watching Isolde too closely caused her, in desperation, to deceive him recklessly. She invites her lover to meet her under a tree, and Mark finds them lying unmistakably in a bed arranged sumptuously for the purpose of making love. Tristan recognizes the discovery, and so disappears from the bed and the kingdom, explaining to Isolde that he will almost certainly return with others to kill them for treachery. So, swearing their eternal love for each other, the lovers are parted.

Tristan flees to Normandy, where he hears of war in Germany, and goes to that country to serve nobly, accomplishing noble deeds worthy of books on their own, and Isolde meanwhile lives tormented for missing her lover. When Tristan travels back to Normandy, and back to Parmenie, he learns that his faithful and beloved friend Rual has died, and so Tristan pledges to take control of that country as its lord, all of Rual's sons and men pledging their loyalty to him. While he is there, he learns of Arundel, and of a feud in need of settling. He goes there to settle the feud and realizes that the maiden there who shares the name of his lover ignites the same feelings in him. The book is cut off just as he begins to give himself permission to entertain such a love.

The Cave of Lovers, Discovery, The Parting, and Isolde of the White Hands Analysis

The climax of Tristan and Isolde's love affair comes in their days of bliss in the Cave of Lovers, and the climax of Gottfried's incrimination of King Mark comes in the chapter describing their parting, when his too-close surveillance inspires Isolde to her final act of treachery against him. The final chapter reads as if Gottfried might have known he was running out of time, since he describes Tristan's acts of heroics abroad simply by saying that they could fill books, and that feuds needed settling and he settles them. He is just settling in to his description of the torment in Tristan's mind, saying that Isolde has been allowed a lover to soothe her pain in King Mark all this time, and so why shouldn't he allow himself to love and have a wife of his own in this new Isolde, when the story is cut off.

Characters

Tristan

Tristan is the primary protagonist of the story. He is the love child of the much-admired-at-court Lord of Parmenie Rivalin, and sister-of-the-king Blancheflor, and accidental recipient of the love potion designed by the queen of Ireland and mother of Isolde. He is raised with the best education and truest affection his father's steward Rual li Foitentant can offer him, but does so and even enters court without the knowledge of his admirable father, or the lordship to which that entitles him. He serves the court nobly, and befriends the king Mark on his merits and with all sincerity. It is only when Rual reveals who he is by birth that he does any fighting. He keeps Mark from having to pay tribute to Ireland at the unjust demand of Morold, and meets Isolde when he schemes his way to Ireland to get the cure for the poison he receives in that battle. He disguises himself in Ireland in much the same way he did upon entering Mark's court, and wins the position of Isolde's tutor, but when he must finally reveal his identity, she becomes angry with him for killing her uncle Morold, calling into question whether the two of them might have fallen in love without the potion. The potion makes their love for each other irresistible, and the two of them undertake throughout the second half of the novel both to serve nobly their offices at court and to satisfy their unquenchable love for each other. The story ends with Tristan seeming to make the decision finally to allow himself to love another (Isolde of the White Hands), since Isolde allowed herself the affection of her husband, the king, throughout their romance. His character is at once a study in faithful love and chivalric service and the deception he practices as an art from his youth.

Isolde

Isolde is the dutiful and well-educated princess of Ireland whom Tristan meets when he is in Ireland in a deceptive attempt to win the queen's favor and thereby the cure for Morold's poison. She is, at first, Tristan's student, and then, when Tristan returns cured from Ireland speaking her praise so fervently in Mark's court, she becomes the woman Mark most wants as his queen. Tristan returns to Ireland to bring her back, and in so doing, rouses her anger against him, since his true identity is the man who killed her uncle Morold. Isolde goes reluctantly to Mark's court with him, since Tristan satisfied the task of slaying her country's dragon in Mark's name. It is on that trip that the two of them imbibe the love potion the Queen had sent with her lady in waiting for her and the king on their wedding night. She then becomes fellow deceiver with Tristan, forced to be both attentive wife and queen to King Mark, and clandestine lover to Tristan. She is very successful, being as smart as she is, and works in close cooperation with her faithful and clever lady-in-waiting, even surviving an ordeal designed to reveal her secret, since she is able to devise an oath that at once seems like the truth they are seeking and is in fact only the truth she is able to tell without revealing anything at all.

Rivalin Canelengres

Tristan's father, Lord of Parmenie. The perfect chivalric man in every way: perfect in body, skill and chivalric manners. He establishes the precedent for love that is also a sorrow in its longing, and for love outside of marriage, although his transgression is mended with the public declaration of love they make at Rual's advice, and that creates their legal marriage. He is also the man who sets up his son's being raised by Rual li Foitenant, and needing to face Morgan in battle, which sets Isolde in his path.

Blancheflor

The beautiful mother of Tristan, and sister of King Mark of Cornwall. She is a perfect practitioner of the love that is sorrow, pain and longing that Gottfried praises so highly.

Queen Isolde

The very clever Queen of Ireland and mother of Isolde. She is sister of Morold, and designer of the poison that tipped his sword and its antidote. She is also the designer of the love potion she sends secretly with Isolde's lady in waiting, intending it for her wedding night with King Mark.

Bragnane

Isolde's lady in waiting, and the one who unwittingly leaves the potion unattended so that Tristan and Isolde mistake it for refreshment on the ship to Cornwall. She is very clever and faithful, trusted implicitly by Queen Isolde, and faithful even after her own Isolde tries to have her killed for fear of her revealing the secret lovers. She repeatedly keeps their secret and helps Isolde know what to say and how to handle the members of court in order to escape exposure.

King Mark

King of Cornwall and friend and admirer of both Rivalin and Tristan. He admires Tristan so sincerely that, before he meets Isolde, he promises not to sire children in order that

Rual li Foitenant

Originally one of many lords under Rivalin in Parmenie, Rual is the man Rivalin chooses to watch over his lands while he is away at King Mark's court. Later, when Rivalin and Blancheflor have fallen in love and conceived, he is the friend who advises them to marry and come away, and to whom Rivalin entrusts their son. Rual raises Tristan with his wife, Floraete, as one of his own sons, highly prizing him and giving him the best education, since he is a man whose loyalty and affection for Rivalin know no bounds.

Curvenal

Tutor and attendant to Tristan from his childhood, who remains faithful to Tristan throughout the story.

Morold

The knight from Ireland who comes to England demanding tribute be paid to Ireland in honor of King Gurmun the Gray. Tristan defeats him in battle, but not before Morold can wound him in the arm with a poison-tipped sword whose poison can only be cured by his sister, the Queen Isolde of Ireland, who designed the poison.

Morgan

The man to whom Rivalin owed allegiance for his land, but whom he defeated in battle, allowing him the year's truce that allowed him to travel to Mark's court.

Gandin

An Irish knight who comes to Cornwall with a scheme to win Isolde for himself by trickery. He is defeated at wits by Tristan just as he is about to sail with her, since Mark would not deny him.

Marjodoc

The noble man and vassal of the king who befriended Tristan as a way of getting close to Isolde, for whom he carried a secret affection, and who cooperated with Melot to try to expose the lovers.

Melot le petit of Aquitaine

The dwarf who cooperated with Marjodoc with lies and traps as he spent time with Isolde and her ladies in an effort to expose the lovers to the very curious King Mark.

Petitcreiu

The enchanted dog of every color and the magic bell whose ringing made sadness impossible. Tristan won him so the bell could eliminate Isolde's sadness, but her happiness felt so unfair compared to Tristan's misery that she threw the bell away.

Isolde of the White Hands

The princess in Normandy to whom Tristan forms an attachment. He fights it at first, but the story ends while he is telling himself that it is right and fair that he should allow himself to love again, since his own Isolde has, and always has had, her King Mark.

Floraete

Rual li Foitenant's wife, who raised Tristan from infancy.

Keadin li frains

Brother of Isolde of the White Hands

Duke Jovelin

Father of Isolde of the White Hands

Objects/Places

Parmenie

The land over which Rivalin, and then Rual, were lords, and where Tristan is raised.

Cornwall

The home of Tintagel, King Mark's castle in England

The Love Potion

Queen Isolde of Ireland creates the love potion to be administered to the young Isolde and King Mark on their wedding night. She entrusts it to Bragnane and she leaves it out of her keeping on the ship to Cornwall just long enough for the exhausted Tristan and Isolde to find and drink it.

The Poison on Morgan's Sword

Queen Isolde uses her knowledge of herbs to tip her brother's sword with a poison to which only she knows the antidote.

The Splinter

The piece of Tristan's sword Isolde kept from her uncle's mortal wound, and that she matches up to Tristan's sword to learn his identity as her uncle's killer.

The Dragon's Tongue

The beast had to be killed in order to win the hand of Isolde, and Tristan keeps the tongue of the dragon to prove that he is the one who took his life.

The Cave of Lovers

The refuge to which Tristan and Isolde retreat when they are exiled for their infidelity, and that Gottfried uses as a metaphor for love in its most noble and complete expression.

Petitcreiu's Bell

Magically eliminates sadness in the listener when it rings

Sambuca

The instrument with which Tristan impresses the members of court, since it is the instrument he plays best.

Ireland

Isolde's home, and the site of Tristan's healing and Tristan and Isolde's meeting

Normandy

The home of Isolde of the White Hands, where Tristan goes after leaving Cornwall

The Merchant Ship

The ship onto which Tristan is first abducted, and that takes him to Cornwall

Arundel

Home of Isolde of the White Hands

Themes

The Best Loves Allow for Pain

Gottfried makes a deliberate point, both in his prologue and in the telling of both of his book's love stories, to point out that part of the glory of these loves was the willingness of its participants to love on even through painful circumstances. For Rivalin and Blancheflor, their pain began with their longing for each other, and then continued as Blancheflor agonized through the uncertainty of Rivalin's survival of his battle-wounds, her leaving her homeland in disguise to be with him, enduring his ultimate death in battle, and finally dying in childbirth. None of these things deterred the lovers from each other, nor made Gottfried question their wisdom in pursuing their love. Likewise, even though Tristan and Isolde love one another involuntarily and as the result of chemistry or magic or both, Gottfried represents them as the most noble of lovers, even while they are forced to be adulterers to practice it. They long for each other, and go to tremendous pains to keep their meetings and their regard secret, even accepting the humiliation of banishment with pleasure, since it allows them to have one another fully and without the need of subversion. Gottfried prepares his readers for this kind of love affair from the very beginning, when he writes as clearly as he can that he does not write for those who would prefer to revel in bliss and run from pain, but instead for those who have loved truly and deeply and through years of refining by fire, allowing themselves to be tempered with love's blows, since they are the readers who will have the hearts to endure and appreciate the story of Tristan and Isolde.

Flexible Definitions of Family

Among the number of ways Gottfried tells his story without confining it to the traditions of the chivalric era is the flexibility he allows in the ways his characters define their families and roles within them. The first example in which his attitudes appear far ahead of his time is the marriage of Rivalin and Blancheflor after they had already conceived Tristan at the suggestion of their trusted friend Rual. Rual not only didn't judge them, but he continued being a faithful and ardent supporter of Rivalin's family in the person of Tristan, his less-than-legitimate son. In fact, the only suggestion that there was any impropriety in the act comes from the enemy Morold, who repeats it as the gossip of the Irish court, casting him as the scoundrel instead. The second thematic example is in the bond between Tristan and Isolde themselves, stronger by far than the bond between Isolde and her spouse, King Mark. The two of them know and love each other with such protective and un-abating devotion that the obstacle doesn't exist that can put a wedge between them. They are the story's paragons of love practiced flawlessly, and the lovers' secret is the beloved treasure of Bragnane, Isolde's noble and virtuous lady in waiting who devotes her energies so tirelessly to protecting them, until the reader sees them as the legitimate match, and the shallow and vain King Mark as the usurper. The third example of the malleability of the family roles is in Rual's relationship to Tristan. His stepping in and raising Tristan as an act of love for his father is clearly something that

Gottfried admired very much, and so when Tristan chooses the possible glory he could attain at court over his continued relationship with him, simply exchanging the father figure of Rual for that of King Mark, it suggests an unexpected degree of flippancy in Tristan, particularly since Gottfried is then so careful to explain the heartbreak Rual and Floraete experienced as a result. That is the only example in the story of the flexibility of family traditions is represented as a negative thing in an otherwise highly traditional culture, strictly adherent to specifically Catholic ideas of family.

The Value of Faithful Friends

Both Tristan and Isolde have friends in the story who help to make their successes and happinesses possible. For Tristan, they are many, beginning with his faithful tutor and companion Curvenal, who is with him for nearly every adventure from his abduction forward. Rual is an obvious asset to Tristan's entire life, giving him the chivalric education that won him not only entry but celebration in King Mark's court, as well as a place in his home amid his own sons, so eager was he to allow him the life of the gentleman Rual knew him worthy to be. Tristan also benefitted from the friendship of King Mark, since the king was willing to grant him his entire kingdom, should he choose to accept it, even promising not to have children in order that his nephew be allowed to be heir to his throne. Mark granted him use of all of his knights, and whatever sovereignty he chose to claim. For Isolde, Bragnane is the uncontested crown-holder as the very best friend she could have. From their childhoods together in Ireland, to her ready confession concerning the potion when she realizes her mistake, to her faithful keeping the secret even when she thought Isolde was going to have her killed, she remains faithful to Isolde and Tristan, applying all of her intelligence and status at court to the benefit of the lovers.

Surveillance as an Evil Practice, Ruinous to Love

Gottfried spends a good deal of time in the chapter entitled, "The Parting", devoted to explaining the idea that watching too closely over a woman's coming and going is the best way to inspire her to sneaky behavior. He suggests that by suspecting her, instead of by teaching and inspiring faithfulness in her by trusting her, a man will inspire her to anger, and thereby bring about the very behavior he suspects in the first place. He even uses the example of Eve in Christian scripture. His contention is that Eve only took a particular interest in the fruit that was forbidden because of the very fact of its having been forbidden. If her attention had not been directed there, Gottfried thinks it is just as likely that she would have left it untouched. But the act of suspicion is what he blames for producing suspicion-worthy behavior. Further, respecting a woman is a way of inspiring her to respect herself, and so to act in moderation as a way of treating herself well, both looking after her honor and her body.

Style

Point of View

Gottfried writes from the perspective of a student of literature and history from around the world, and the past as well as the present. He seeks to tell the best version of the story of Tristan and Isolde as he gathers it from the several who have told it before with the purpose of revealing the best truths about love as demonstrated by two who practiced it as well as it has been practiced. His sources are writers and historians whom he praises and criticizes as occasion calls for it, and in that way sets himself up as a translator of previous literature for his readers, crystallizing what he sees to be the most worthy parts of the lovers' story. He also speaks as a member and student of the culture of chivalry, well acquainted both with its ability to bring forth and accentuate the best parts of people's characters, and the many hypocrisies present in those who claim to be its adherents, particularly at court. In that way, he represents Tristan as both capable and well-trained, and scheming when it served his ends. King Mark is, to Gottfried, vain and materialistic, traits whose contrast with Tristan's most chivalric love for Isolde accentuate his disdain for a conventionally spotless respect for the court. Gottfried manages to be timeless, in fact, because of his ability to tell the story as a human story about flawed characters in a flawed system when his contemporaries were writing much more idealized stories.

Setting

The story takes place in thirteenth-century western Europe, primarily in England. Rivalin's fiefdom, which then becomes Rual's as Tristan's steward, is Parmenie, and that is also where Tristan was raised. It is from that town that Tristan is first abducted by the merchants. Cornwall is the location of King Mark's citadel, and it is in King Mark's court where the majority of the rest of the story takes place. Morgan and Isolde are from Ireland, so that is also where Tristan is healed of his poisoned wound, first becomes Isolde's tutor, and later kills the dragon to win her hand for Mark. The Cave of Lovers is the setting of the lovers' exile, and their happiest time, and the text only reveals that it was somewhere in the countryside of Mark's kingdom. And the final location for any part of the story is Normandy, where Tristan finds the kingdom of princess Isolde of the White Hands. The story's being set in the era of chivalry means that the presence of knights, damsels in distress, dragons and magic are all nearly essential elements, and they drive the action here as in nearly any other story from the era. There is also the element of the story's being set over several years, so the reader has the perspective of the effects of the choices of one generation on the lives of the one that follows it.

Language and Meaning

Gottfried's elegant language is unusual for his era, and as noted in the forward to the story, isn't matched among his countrymen until the eighteenth century. He lingers over his descriptions both of the physical beauty and adornment of his characters, and of the goings-on of their hearts, delving much more deeply into the virtues of a love that doesn't shy away from pain than anyone else would do for generations to come. Since wrote in German, the translation offered modern American readers comes by way of Francis C. Gentry, for whom A. T. Hatto was a significant source. The vocabulary is at once elaborate and accessible to modern readers, allowing for the formality of Gottfried's voice to remain while the idiosyncrasies of the centuries-old German have been translated away. There are several examples of words necessary to the story just because of their presence in the life of the court, like descriptions of costume, elements of the hunt and other sports, and things to do with the Catholic church. None of these complicate understanding in any way, however, and their definitions can most often be deduced by the context in which they are used.

Structure

Gottfried's story follows a Forward by C. Stephen Jaeger that explains the significance of the story by contrasting it with the normative stories of its era, as well as an introduction by the story's translator, Francis C. Gentry that explains how the story represents quite accurately aspects of the era in the context in which Gottfried would have been doing his writing. Gottfried arranges his telling chronologically, beginning with the love story of Tristan's parents, which is both ideal and tragic, and thereby perfectly sets up the beautiful and tragic story of Tristan and Isolde. He lingers over the development of Tristan's character, as well as the culture of the court, so the story of Tristan and Isolde when they are finally together is well-seated in a context the reader knows and understands well. The story is organized into chapters titled for their main character or event, making for a very episodic and easily digestible story. Each chapter has its own arc, and so makes for a much gentler read than if the whole story were focused on the lovers only. The fact that Gottfried left the story unfinished leaves the conclusion to the lovers' story unknown, and the final denouement incomplete.

Quotes

"If there are medieval categories into which the romance fits conveniently, they are yet to be found and formulated. Add to this fact that Gottfried wrote in a style so elegant that it was not to be matched in Germany until the late eighteenth century, that his education is clearly far superior to any contemporary, and one is tempted to ask whether the whole thing is not the product of some nineteenth-century forger. It is in any case one of those unique works of genius that presents itself to the reader as if the period it is set in were just historical costume. It is not narrowly bound by the forms of thought, characterization and representation that hedged in other contemporary works." Forward, page ix

"I do not mean the world of the many who (as I hear) are unable to endure sorrow and wish only to revel in bliss. (Please God to let them live in their bliss!) What I have to say does not concern that world and such a way of life; their way and mine diverge sharply. I have another world in mind which together in one heart bears its bitter-sweet, its dear sorrow, its heart's joy, its love's pain, its dear life, its sorrowful death, its dear death, its sorrowful life. To this life let my life be given, of this world let me be part, to be damned or saved with it." Prologue, page 4

"But I must and will not afflict your ears with matters which are too distressing, since too much talk of grief offends them and there is nothing so good that it does not pall from being said too often. Therefore let us leave longdrawn laments and apply ourselves to what we shall tell of the orphan from whom this tale takes its rise. Men's affairs often turn ill to fortune, then back from ill fortune to good." Chapter 2, Rual li Foitenant, page 27

"And so the homeless boy became a favorite at court. You never saw such felicity in a child as could be seen in him. Whatever he did, whatever he said seemed (and was) so good, that all cherished friendly feelings and tender affection for him." Chapter 5, The Young Musician, page 53

"An ultimate limit had been set for Tristan in the twin spheres of success and misfortune; for in everything that he set his hand to he succeeded for the most part; yet his success was dogged with misfortune, little though the latter has in common with it. Thus these two opposites, constant success and abiding misfortune, were paired together in one man." Chapter 8, Return and Revenge, page 71

"As the true version has always said and says today, Morold had the strength of four men. Such was the one side. On the other it comprised: first God; second Right; the third was their vassal and servitor, loyal Tristan; the fourth was Firm Resolve, who works wonders in extremities." Chapter 9, Morold, page 93

"Thus, under Tristan's instruction, lovely Isolde had much improved herself. Her disposition was charming, her manners and bearing good. She had mastered some fine instruments and many skilled accomplishments. Of love-songs she could make both the

words and the airs and polish them beautifully. She was able to read and write." Chapter 10, Tantris, page 107

"Those two conflicting qualities, those warring contradictions, womanhood and anger, which accord so ill together, fought a hard battle in her breast. When anger in Isolde's breast was about to slay her enemy, sweet womanhood intervened. 'No, don't!', it softly whispered. Thus her heart was divided in purpose — a single heart was at one and the same time both good and evil." Chapter 13, The Splinter, page 135

"While Tristan and his compatriots were making ready, Isolde, the prudent Queen, was brewing in a vial a love-drink so subtly devised and prepared, and endowed with such powers, that with whomever any man drank it he had to love her above all things, whether he wished it or no, and she love him alone. They would share one death and one life, one sorrow and one joy." Chapter 15, The Love Potion, page 151

"They are right who say that 'Love is hounded to the ends of the earth'. All that we have is the bare word, only the name remains to us: and this we have so hackneyed, so abused, and so debased, that the poor, tired thing is ashamed of her own name and disgusted at the word." Chapter 16, The Avowal, page 162

"Now that the Queen Isolde had found Bragnane loyal, constant, and altogether of upright character, and had smelted her in the crucible and refined her like gold, she and Bragnane were so deeply devoted in mutual love and trustfulness that no difference was ever made between them in any of their affairs, so that their feels toward each other were of the happiest.... Bragnane was assiduous in her service to Isolde: she served her in all her interests with regard to her lover Tristan." Chapter 17, Bragnane, page 170

"Mark, meanwhile, was afflicted with a double sorrow. He was harassed by the doubt and suspicion which he had and could not fail to have. He deeply suspected his darling Isolde; he had doubts about Tristan, in whom he could find no sign either of deceit or of treachery. His friend Tristan, his joy Isolde — these two were his chief affliction." Chapter 20, Plot and Counterplot, page 182

"Hear the oath which I mean to swear: 'That no man in the world had carnal knowledge of me or lay in my arms or beside me but you, always excepting the poor pilgrim whom, with your own eyes, you saw lying in my arms.' I can offer no purgation concerning him." Chapter 23, The Ordeal, page 206

"For as soon as the faithful Queen had received the dog and heard the bell which made her forget her sorrow, she had reflected that her friend Tristan bore a load of troubles for her sake, and she immediately thought to herself, 'O faithless woman, how can I be glad? Why am I happy for any time at all while Tristan, who has surrendered his life and joy to sorrow for my sake, is sad because of me?.... So saying, she broke off the bell, leaving the chain round the little dog's neck. From this the bell lost its whole virtue." Chapter 24, Petitcreiu, page 215

"I mean pure devotion, love made sweet as balm that consoles body and sense so tenderly, and sustains the heart and spirit — this was their best nourishment. Truly, they never considered any food but that from which the heart drew desire, the eyes delight, and which the body, too, found agreeable. With this they had enough. Love, their source of nourishment, kept pace all the time, and gave them an abundant store of all those things that go to make heaven on earth." Chapter 26, The Cave of Lovers, page 222

"If Isolde was ever united with Tristan in one heart and bond, it will always remain fresh, it will endure for ever! But I will ask one thing: to whichever corners of the earth you go, take care of yourself, my life! For when I am orphaned of you, then I, your life, will have perished. I will guard myself, your life, with jealous care, not for my sake but yours, knowing that your life is one with mine. We are one life and flesh." Chapter 28, The Parting, page 240

"Things are not as they were when we two endured one good, one ill, one joy, one sorrow together. Alas, it is not so now! Now I am wretched, but you are happy. My thoughts are full of longing for your love, while yours, I imagine, long but little for me. The pleasure I forgo for your sake — ah, how it pains me! — you pursue as often as you please! You have your partner for it. Your master, Mark, and you are at home, you are inseparable companions; but I am abroad and alone. It seems to me that I shall have little solace of you, and yet I can never free my heart from you. Why have you robbed me of myself, seeing that you have so little desire for me and can so well do without me?" Chapter 29, Isolde of the White Hands, page 254

"Be modest and straightforward: be truthful and well-bred. Always be kind to the lowly: to the mighty always be proud. Cultivate your appearance. Honor and love all women. Be generous and loyal, and never tire of it. For I stake my honor that gold and sable never sat better on shield and spear than loyalty and generosity." Chapter 7, Tristan's Investiture and Gottfried's Literary Excursus, page 70

"A wise man, therefore, that is, one who grants woman her esteem, should keep no watch over her privacy in defiance of her own good will other than by council and instruction, and by tenderness and kindness. Let him guard her with that, and let him know this for a fact: he will never keep better watch. For whether she be vicious or good, if a man wrongs a woman too often she may well conceive a whim that he would rather be without. Every worthy man, and whoever aspires to be one, should trust in his wife and himself, so that for love of him she may shun all wantonness. However much he tries, a man will never extort love from a woman by wrong means — that is how to extinguish it. In matters of love, surveillance is an evil practice. It awakens ruinous anger and leads to a woman's downfall." Chapter 28, The Parting, page 235

Topics for Discussion

Do you think Tristan and Isolde would have fallen in love without Queen Isolde's love potion? Does it diminish their love in your perception? Explain.

What do you see as Tristan's most admirable qualities? What are his liabilities?

Do you see any ways in which chivalric culture is represented as a bad thing? Describe them.

Do you see any ways in which modern culture benefit from reinstating some chivalric ideals? Explain.

Do Tristan's battles with Morgan and Morold diminish him in any way in your perception? Why or why not?

In what ways, if any, are the human foibles of the characters helpful to the story? In what ways, if any, are they obstacles?

Isolde designs a circumstance that allows her to swear an oath that will not be viewed as false in the eyes of God. Since she does not, in the end, get burned, what do you think that episode suggests about Gottfried's view of God? What do you think it says about his view of the lovers?

What do you think of Gottfried's advice to men not to watch their wives too closely, since too tight a hold will inspire women to bad behavior? Explain.