

The Once and Future King



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF T. H. WHITE

White was born in Bombay, India to English parents and experienced a tumultuous childhood with an alcoholic father and emotionally distant mother—his parents separated when White was fourteen. White attended a boarding school in England and then Cambridge University where he wrote a thesis on Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. While at Cambridge, he was tutored by the scholar and author L.J. Potts who White referred to as "the greatest literary influence on my life." After Cambridge, he taught at Stowe school, before moving into a workman's cottage where he engaged in falconry, hunting, and fishing and wrote a series of novels about disasters and fantasy worlds. In Autumn, 1937 he found his way back to Malory and published *The Sword in the Stone* in 1938. During the Second World War, White moved to Ireland and lived as a conscientious objector. It was during this period that he wrote the final three parts to *The Once and Future King*. According to Sylvia Townsend Warner's biography of White he was "a homosexual and a sado-masochist" and he never married. In 1946, White settled in Aldeney, one of the Channel Islands, where he lived for the rest of his life—towards the end of his life he became a heavy drinker. He died in 1964 from a heart attack aboard a ship in Piraeus (Greece) en route to Aldeney from a lecture tour in the United States.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Second World War. White was a conscientious objector to the war and wrote the last three books of the novel during the period of WWII. The book is clear in its aversion to war and a pacifist mentality, though Arthur's failed attempts to find ways to prevent war and violence suggest White's cynicism regarding mankind's ability to give up such bloodshed.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

White's main literary influence for *The Once and Future King* was Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. White wrote his thesis on this text while at Cambridge and Malory's version of the Arthurian myth is referenced throughout the novel. Other works based on the Arthurian myth include Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and Chrétien de Troyes' stories.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Once and Future King*

- **When Written:** 1938-1941
- **Where Written:** *The Sword in the Stone* was written in England; the other three books were written in Doolistown, Ireland.
- **When Published:** *The Sword in the Stone* was published in 1938; *The Queen of Air and Darkness* was published in 1939; *The Ill-Made Knight* was published in 1940; *The Candle in the Wind* was first published as part of the whole text in 1958.
- **Literary Period:** *The Once and Future King* comes from no specific literary period, but has associations with multiple movements. Around the same period White wrote this novel, Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings*—another epic, fantasy novel. The early/mid twentieth century also saw the beginnings of magical realism—a movement in which magical elements are part of an otherwise realistic environment. However, the movement was not solidified until 1955 (after White had already written the novel) and White's magical events originate from a world not wholly mundane and realistic.
- **Genre:** An Arthurian fantasy novel, although the novel combines a variety of different genres: fantasy, satire, myth and even possibly *bildungsroman* as it charts Arthur's journey from Wart to King Arthur.
- **Setting:** The semi-fictional world of the Isle of Gramarye. Gramarye is White's name for Great Britain during the early Norman period. However, White's Great Britain is filled with fantasy creatures and happenings.
- **Climax:** Because this novel is made up of four individual books, there are multiple climaxes: when Wart pulls the sword from the stone in the churchyard and is crowned king; when Lancelot and Guenever are first unfaithful to Arthur; when the Holy Grail is found and Lancelot returns to Camelot converted; and when Mordred commits treason and crowns himself King while Arthur is in France.
- **Point of View:** The novel is narrated in the omniscient third person, although this narrative voice consciously narrates from a contemporary era.

EXTRA CREDIT

Title. The book's title comes from the inscription that, according to Malory, was written on Arthur's tombstone: *Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus*. Meaning "Her lies Arthur, king once, and king to be."

Film. Walt Disney purchased the rights to *The Ill-Made Knight* in 1944, but eventually made an adaptation of *The Sword in the Stone* in 1963.



PLOT SUMMARY

Book I, *The Sword in the Stone*, introduces the character of Wart who later becomes King Arthur. Wart lives with his guardian Sir Ector and Sir Ector's son Kay at the Castle Sauvage, under the tutelage of an eccentric magician Merlyn. Throughout his early years, Wart is turned into many different animals by Merlyn, such as an ant, a fish, a badger, and a goose, and each adventure serves as a lesson about violence and authority that will inform his later years as King of England.

After Kay is knighted and Wart becomes his squire, they all travel to London for a tournament. The old King Uther Pendragon has recently died leaving no heir and it is proclaimed that whoever can pull a mysterious **sword from the stone** will be the new King of England. While on an errand as Kay's squire, Wart pulls the sword from the stone without realizing what he's doing and is crowned King. Merlyn later tells Wart that he is King Uther's illegitimate son and that Merlyn had known this all along.

In Book II, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, we are introduced to the Orkney brothers—Gawaine, Gaheris, Gareth and Agravaine. They are Queen Morgause and King Lot's sons, and half-brothers to Arthur. Meanwhile, a young King Arthur is attempting to curtail the Gaelic revolt being led by King Lot. Arthur is beginning to plan how to rule when the battle is over. He comes up with the idea of the **Round Table**: the Order of the Knights of the Round Table will be his attempt to use **Might for Right**. He will band together knights who only use their power and violence for justice and the table will be round so that all knights are equal.

Ultimately, Arthur squashes the rebellion and Queen Morgause comes to court, to reconcile with Arthur for King Lot. She ends up seducing him and gives birth to his son—Mordred.

Book III, *The Ill-Made Knight*, tells the story of Lancelot. Lancelot is a boy when he first meets Arthur and decides he will become Arthur's greatest knight, although he suffers from internal conflicts about his unworthiness. Later, as a young knight at Arthur's court, Lancelot and Queen Guenever (Arthur's wife) fall in love. To escape his feelings for Guenever, Lancelot sets off on a series of quests that end in him being seduced by a young girl named Elaine. Returning to Camelot, Lancelot and Guenever begin an affair, although this abruptly ends when Elaine turns up carrying Lancelot's son. Lancelot is driven mad by Guenever's rage and wanders around England as a wild, mad man for a number of years.

Eventually, years later, Elaine recognizes Lancelot in a mad man upon the streets. He returns to Camelot, but finds that Arthur's Order has begun to unravel. The knights, because they have solved most of the injustice with their violence, have begun to turn on each other. Arthur resolves to send his knights off on a **Quest** for the **Holy Grail** to make them moral men.

Three knights—Sir Bors, Sir Percival and Sir Galahad (Lancelot's son by Elaine)—eventually find the Grail but are too perfected by their endeavor and never return. Lancelot returns, a holy and converted man and refuses to begin his relationship with Guenever again. However, after she is kidnapped and Lancelot rescues her, defending her honor, they quickly begin their relationship once more.

In Book IV, *The Candle in the Wind*, Arthur's Order is truly broken. Agravaine and Arthur's son Mordred, fueled by hatred, set out to bring down Arthur's reign. They decide to use Arthur's new laws—to use a jury and proof to prove guilt, rather than trial by combat—to reveal Lancelot and Guenever's relationship. This they do and Guenever is almost executed, but rescued by Lancelot at the last moment. However, in rescuing Guenever, Lancelot kills two of the Orkney brothers (Gareth and Gaheris) who were unarmed.

On the urging of Mordred and Gawaine, Arthur lays siege to Lancelot's castle. The lovers ask the Pope for pardon and are granted it—however, Lancelot is banished to France. Arthur and Gawaine follow Lancelot to France where they lay siege to him once more because Gawaine must avenge the deaths of his brothers. While they are away in France, Mordred falsely announces that the King is dead and announces himself as King. He also tries to force Guenever to marry him, but she barricades herself in the Tower of London. Arthur returns to England and Gawaine forgives Lancelot so that he can aid Arthur. The novel closes on the eve of the final battle against Mordred. Arthur knows that he will die in battle, but that Mordred will be defeated and his legacy of justice over violence will live on.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

King Arthur or Wart – Arthur is the main protagonist of the novel. He is the illegitimate son of King Uther Pendragon, although he spends his childhood thinking he is a lowly squire. King Arthur is married to Queen Guenever, although she has an affair with Arthur's best knight and friend Lancelot. It is Arthur's life-long endeavor—influenced by his childhood tutor Merlyn—to curtail violence, prevent warfare, and instill justice in England.

Sir Lancelot – Lancelot is considered to be the best knight in Arthur's court and his best friend. Lancelot, despite his talent, is deeply insecure and conflicted about his worthiness. He has a long affair with Queen Guenever, which only accentuates deep insecurities about his morality. On a quest, he is seduced by a woman named Elaine who gives birth to his son—Galahad.

Queen Guenever – Guenever is married to King Arthur, although she has a long love affair with Sir Lancelot. Despite her affair, Guenever is a deeply complex, beautiful, and

fundamentally good person. Although she betrays Arthur, she is simultaneously very committed to him, supportive of him and very much loves him. Perhaps the greatest tragedy about Guenever, and what drives many of her vices, is that she remains childless.

Merlyn – Merlyn is an eccentric magician who serves as Wart's tutor throughout his childhood. Merlyn lives time backwards and thus already knows what is going to happen to Arthur. By turning Wart into different animals, Merlyn teaches him about violence, warfare and justice, and informs the King Arthur will become. Eventually, Merlyn meets and falls in love with the witch Nimue who locks him in a cave for thousands of years.

Queen Morgause – Morgause is an evil witch and one of Arthur's half-sisters. She is sister to Morgan Le Fay and Queen Elaine (different from the Elaine who seduces Lancelot), and mother to Gawaine, Gaheris, Gareth, Agravaine and Mordred. She seduces Arthur when he is very young and gives birth to his son, Mordred. Morgause is eventually murdered by her own son Agravaine after he finds her in bed with a young knight.

King Pellinore – King Pellinore is one of the first knights Wart meets as a child. He is a bumbling idiot, but good-hearted, whose life purpose is to chase the **Questing Beast**. However, in Book II, Pellinore falls in love with the Queen of Flanders' daughter and abandons his quest. King Pellinore is Sir Percival's father—one of the knights to find the **Holy Grail**.

Gawaine – Gawaine is one of the Orkney brothers and Morgause's son. He also becomes one of Arthur's knights and goes off on many quests. He is depicted throughout as a barbaric figure that cannot control his temper and violence. Towards the end of Book IV, he is driven mildly mad when Lancelot kills his brothers Gareth and Gaheris and pursues Lancelot. However, at the end of the novel, Gawaine forgives Lancelot and writes a beautiful, moving letter revealing a sensitive, moral side.

Gareth – Gareth is one of the Orkney brothers, but is the most moral and sensitive of them all. As the youngest, except Mordred, he flees Orkney for Camelot where he becomes a pageboy in the kitchens. He is befriended by Lancelot who knights him without knowing who he is. Later, Lancelot will accidentally kill Gareth (who is unarmed) when he rescues Guenever from her execution.

Agravaine – Agravaine is another of the Orkney brothers and the most twisted of them all, excepting Mordred. He is deeply in love with his mother Morgause and eventually kills her when he finds her in bed with a knight. Later in the novel, he tries to prove Lancelot and Guenevers' adulterous relationship, but is killed by Lancelot in the attempt.

Sir Galahad – Galahad is Lancelot's son with Elaine. He is the most deeply moral and religious characters in the novel and remains a virgin his whole life. He is one of the knights to find the **Holy Grail**, but never returns from the **Quest**, having

become too perfect to return. Before finding the Grail, he spends six months on a boat with Lancelot where the two get to know each other.

Elaine – On his first quest, Lancelot rescues the young Elaine from a tower. She falls in love with him and seduces him, and eventually gives birth to his son Galahad. Elaine is a tortured woman who knows Lancelot will never love her, but nonetheless stays true to him. After finding Lancelot mad on the streets, the two live for a while with Galahad in a castle. After Galahad never returns from his **quest** and Elaine realizes Lancelot will never come back to her, Elaine kills herself.

King Uther Pendragon – King Uther is Arthur's father and predecessor. While King of England he killed the Earl of Cornwall and then married his wife Queen Igraine. Before they were married, Igraine gave birth to their son—Arthur—who had to be hidden away because he was born out of wedlock. Before marrying Uther, Igraine had had three daughters with the Earl of Cornwall—Morgause, Morgan Le Fay and Elaine.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mordred – Mordred is Arthur's illegitimate son by Queen Morgause. Mordred is a sickly, twisted man who turns mad in his later years. While Arthur is away in France, Mordred falsely announces that Arthur is dead and crowns himself King of England.

Sir Kay – Kay is Sir Ector's son and grows up as Wart's companion. During their childhood, Kay is egotistical, insecure and deeply jealous of Wart. When he is made a knight, Wart acts as his squire until he pulls the **sword from the stone**.

Sir Ector – Sir Ector is Wart's guardian until he is crowned King, although he has no idea of Wart's royal parentage. Sir Ector is a good man, but also a very comedic figure because he is somewhat idiotic. Sir Ector makes very few appearances after the first Book.

Sir Grummore Grummerson – Sir Grummore is another of the knights featured in Book I. Again, much like Sir Ector and King Pellinore, he is a bumbling idiot and a very comedic figure—although ultimately a good-hearted knight.

Gaheris – Gaheris is one of the Orkney brothers, but is featured least in the novel. He is one of Arthur's knights, but is killed by Lancelot, along with Gareth, when Lancelot rescues Guenever from her execution.

Sir Percival – Percival is one of King Pellinore's sons. He is pure, gentle but a somewhat bumbling knight. Because of his innocence however, he is one of the knights to find the **Holy Grail** and never returns from the **quest**.

Sir Bors – Sir Bors is one of the knights to find the **Holy Grail**, but does return from the **quest**. He is described by White as a misogynist, who nonetheless remains loyal to Lancelot throughout the novel.

King Lot – King Lot is married to Queen Morgause and leads the Gaelic rebellion against Arthur at the beginning of the novel. He is also father of Gawaine, Gaheris, Gareth and Agravaine.

Morgan Le Fay – Morgan is one of the Cornwall sisters and the most powerful witch. In Book I, Wart and Kay must enter her Castle to free prisoners. She reappears in some of the later quests Arthur's knights undertake.

Uncle Dap – Uncle Dap is Lancelot's uncle and squire.

Nimue – Nimue is the young witch Merlyn falls in love with. She ultimately imprisons Merlyn in a cave for thousands of years.

King Pelles – Elaine's father. When Lancelot arrives at his castle as a mad-man, King Pelles—while drunk—places his gown around Lancelot, thus revealing Lancelot's true self.

Lyo-Lyok – The goose with whom Wart becomes friends during his time as a goose. Lyo-Lyok teaches Wart about there being no need for borders between people.

Mr. P – The evil pike dictator of the moat. This is the first character who introduces Wart to the idea of Power and Might vs. Right

Sir Meliagrance – The knight who, being in love with Guenever, kidnaps her. He is eventually killed by Lancelot in a trial by combat.

Igraine, Duchess of Cornwall – Originally the wife of the Earl of Cornwall. After the Earl is killed by King Uther, she becomes the king's wife. Before they are married, she gives birth to King Uther's son, Arthur, who must be hidden away.

satirizing the chivalric code and revealing its paradoxes and flaws.

The first way in which White undermines the notion of chivalry is through satirizing the knight and portraying him as a clown. The first Knight that Wart encounters in the text is King Pellinore; Wart, in his naivety, is awed by the figure of King Pellinore. However, White describes King Pellinore as a clumsy, idiotic figure on the quest for something that does not exist. Another component of knighthood is the quest—a journey for some ultimate goal that entails many challenges. Upon first meeting King Pellinore, Wart learns he has been pursuing the 'questing beast' for many years. However, as soon as Sir Grummore invites him to Camelot, King Pellinore immediately gives up this quest in return for a clean bed. King Pellinore's weak adherence to the challenge of questing illustrates the arbitrary nature of the values of knighthood—King Pellinore's quest is purposeless and his dedication to it lackluster.

Knighthood is governed by the chivalric code (which White pays a great deal of attention to), but also by a series of practices associated with medieval life—all of which White seeks to satirize. For example, early on in the text, King Pellinore and Sir Grummore challenge one another to a jousting match. White describes the pair as clumsy and idiotic—their armor is so heavy they are unable to canter with much speed, and when they are both dismounted they proceed to charge at each other using their bodies as weapons. Moreover, White describes their jousting tournament as though they were simply acting out a script; they consistently remind one another of the line they must say next. In this manner, White represents the so-called honor of jousting—and therefore honor in general—as simply a form of superficial rote learning, or the act of unthinkingly following a set of rigid rules.

If King Pellinore is one representation of knighthood and one way in which White undermines the ideal figure, then the character of Sir Lancelot is the other. It is through Lancelot's representation that White reveals the true flaw of the knighthood ideal: Knights must commit enormous acts of violence, but must also stay true to the code of honor and chivalry—something innately incompatible. In this manner, Lancelot is simultaneously supremely insecure about his honor, but commits huge acts of violence. His is an incongruous figure and reveals the paradox of the knightly ideal.

White's depiction of medieval life is a complex and evolving one: when Arthur first comes to the throne, the medieval England depicted is one very much in the dark ages—knights commit acts of violence unchecked, life is dark, harsh and illiterate. However, by the end of Arthur's rule, medieval England has altered radically: knights are bound to a different honor code where they can only commit acts of violence in the name of justice, men are educated, and life is far more enlightened. Although the medieval life depicted towards the end of Arthur's reign is arguably better, White still satirizes



THEMES

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CHIVALRY, SATIRE & MEDIEVAL LIFE

The myth of King Arthur has been recounted in many different texts—including Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Chrétien de Troyes' *Four Arthurian Romances* and Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In all these accounts, knights are depicted as heroic and highly chivalrous: knights are bound to the chivalric code and are portrayed as honorable, loyal noblemen. The chivalric code is a code of conduct associated with the medieval tradition of knighthood; the code entails following the ideals of honor, courtly love, courtesy, gallantry and service to others. However, in *The Once and Future King*, White systematically undermines the ideal of the chivalrous knight—both by

many of its ideals, such as its excesses and political intrigues.



FATE (TIME)

Fate is a power that predetermines the course of all events. In *The Once and Future King*, fate plays an integral role. White, thinly disguised as the narrator, very consciously recounts the tale of King Arthur from a contemporary perspective—thus, the narrator regularly cites modern technologies or recent historical events, such as World War II. The narrator is very present in the novel; the voice comments subjectively upon the action within the text and gives us his opinion upon characters. White very consciously shows that this book, although set in a historical era, is being narrated from a contemporary perspective. By doing so, White simultaneously accentuates the mythic nature of the tale, but also changes the way narrative omniscience is working: the narrative omniscience functions simply because the narrator is very consciously narrating from our own contemporary era, rather than because it is innately superior to the action. This consciously modern perspective lends the tale a peculiar and somewhat alternative notion of fate: characters are fated, not because of the unstoppable force of 'fate,' but because this is a mythic story whose end is already known—the story is controlled and determined by its own folkloric tradition.

Another core component of fate in the novel, in addition to the narrative perspective, is time. Traditionally, fate and time are two inextricably linked components: fate is the force that pulls characters to their destiny, while time is the vector that cannot be stopped and helps fate achieve its ends. For example, in [Hamlet](#), Hamlet consistently laments the role fate plays in his life, but it is time that he must come to terms with—how he cannot change events that have already taken place, nor can he slow down the pace of the clock.

However, in *The Once and Future King*, time is instead somewhat flexible. Merlyn—a magician and Wart's tutor—experiences Time backwards. He began his life in the future and must live backwards in Time, not forwards. Because of this, Merlyn is aware of what is to come and consistently gets younger throughout the novel. This representation of Time achieves a number of things: first, it feeds into the fantastical elements of the novel and suggests that the world of Camelot is somewhat removed or exempt from the normal rules of existence. This helps the reader to suspend belief when Wart undergoes his 'lessons,' transforming into an ant or a hawk. More importantly, Time is a great burden to Merlyn; he is perhaps somewhat wiser because he has already experienced the future, but it is significantly more difficult. In the beginnings of the novel, Merlyn explains his experience of Time using the analogy of trying to draw a W in a mirror: Wart, when he attempts to do this, draws only an M. Fate necessarily plays a central role in *The Once and Future King*—precisely because of its folkloric

tradition—but Merlyn's difficulties with Time suggest that perhaps knowing what is to come is not necessarily positive. Indeed, Arthur's character undermines his folkloric self—the chivalric knight becomes the modern, innovative leader—suggesting that although the outcome of his life may be predetermined, the process in which he both innovates and ultimately fails is not. In this manner, White uses Merlyn's experience of time and Arthur's own predetermined existence to illustrate the powerlessness of fate—it is not a powerful, unrelenting force, but simply the framework of folklore that can be molded (not broken) by a modernized perspective.



QUEST AND THE HOLY GRAIL

The Quest is a traditional literary device. In literature, a quest is a journey towards a goal and can serve as a plot device or as a symbol. In a quest, the hero must overcome many obstacles and the quest usually requires extensive travel and a series of trials to test the knight's valor and piety. One of the most famous quests in literature is that for the Holy Grail in Arthurian legend.

The first quest the novel describes is King Pellinore's search for the 'questing beast.' Although this is not greatly expanded upon, King Pellinore has been searching for the questing beast for years and has never found it. The 'questing beast' is symbolic; it represents the elusive quest itself: the journey to locate something that cannot be found and the aimlessness it entails, a journey that mirrors Arthur's own ultimately unsuccessful journey throughout the novel to harness tyranny and use justice as a mode of rule.

Although this is one literal depiction of a quest, the quest plays a fundamental role in Wart's education and his transformation into King Arthur. Throughout *The Sword in the Stone*, Wart undergoes a series of his own quests—mini adventures that form the central part of his education under Merlyn. For example, his transformation into an ant. Each of these journeys are not the traditional form of quest, in that Wart is unaware of the specific goal or purpose of the adventure, but each journey serves as a lesson about how to lead and govern, so that the later King Arthur will use non-traditional (at least, non-medieval) methods of rule. With the example of the ant, Wart witnesses how ants follow the dictatorial rule of their queen unquestioningly. Although these 'citizens' are orderly, they do not question the morality of the battle the ants engage in—the reasons given for war are, by Wart's questioning of them, shown to be illogical and purely propaganda.

The Holy Grail is, as already mentioned, a central component of the Arthurian myth: it is the search by King Arthur and his Knights for a copper cup or plate used by Jesus at the Last Supper. In *The Once and Future King*, the Holy Grail is Arthur's last resort, the ideal he turns to when his attempt to 'harness Tyranny' fails with the collapse of the Round Table and the continued domination of force over justice. However, this

attempt once more proves unsuccessful; those who are successful in the Quest are too perfect, and therefore cannot exist in King Arthur's world of injustice; and those who fail do not change or improve.

In traditional literature, quests are almost always successful. However, in *The Once and Future King*, quests are unachievable—they are ideals that almost always collapse when you move closer to them: the questing beast is forever elusive, and the Holy Grail requires an impractical level of perfection. Indeed, the only quests that do not prove unsuccessful are Wart's lessons as a child; these quests are non-traditional because they do not have a specific goal and are thus about the 'journey,' or what is learnt throughout. Thus, in *The Once and Future King*, the quest itself becomes an illusion when it generates false and unattainable ideals, and can only prove useful when the quest is an end in itself rather than a means.



MIGHT VS. RIGHT

In *The Once and Future King*, Arthur is not depicted as a traditional heroic figure—the chivalrous, military hero—but as a political innovator.

Throughout his rule, Arthur seeks to temper force and strength ('might') with justice ('right'). In the novel, these two words are symbolic for the warring forces Arthur unsuccessfully attempts to control.

Merlyn's early lessons for young Wart are vehicles to teach Arthur about the correct parameters for ruling; they are to prepare Arthur to be a heroic and successful ruler. In the medieval England of Arthur's youth (as described in "The Sword and the Stone"), characters are unable to distinguish between might and right and the only justification necessary for rule is force, as opposed to justice.

In "The Queen of Air and Darkness," once he is king, Arthur establishes the Round Table: the round table symbolizes Arthur's attempt to balance force with justice. The table is round so that there is no hierarchy and all knights (even Arthur) are equal. Arthur wants situations and conflicts to be resolved equally and with reason, rather than with hierarchy and strength. Arthur wanted the table to not only be symbolic, but also a vehicle for breeding a new generation of knighthood, with the importance of justice over strength instilled in them—the best of who is to be Lancelot.

Arthur's attempt to temper might with right ultimately fails. In the last few pages of the novel, as Arthur is dying and coming to terms with the failings of his rule, he begins to understand the notion of justice as merely a child's dream, rather than something attainable. Perhaps the most symbolic illustration of this failure is White's depiction of Lancelot—Lancelot was to be the first of the new generation of knights who use war and violence only in the name of justice. However, Lancelot is a complex figure, neither moral nor immoral; he is a real

character and, because of this, cannot attain the perfect figure of knighthood Arthur had envisioned.

White seeks to challenge the mythic idealization of King Arthur as the heroic warrior, portraying his leadership as one that hopes only to replace force and strength with justice. The novel illustrates the barbarity of traditional knighthood and undermines the romanticism of the medieval era. Ultimately, however, Arthur's attempt fails; this failure is one that parallels contemporary attempts at justice—the narrator consciously places Arthur's reign against the context of World War II. White's commentary upon the medieval ideal and Arthur's failed attempt to temper power with justice highlights a perpetual human flaw, how, even today, justice and right collapse in the face of brute violence.



WAR

War occupies a central role in *The Once and Future King*. The Medieval England depicted in the novel is almost a perpetual battlefield, with multiple political factions vying for power. Indeed, war is canonical in the Arthurian myth; however battle scenes are barely described in this text, and when they are, White presents war as something barbaric and violent, rather than heroic and justified.

The first presentation of war is during one of Wart's lessons as a child, when he is transformed into an ant. The ant community is robotic, the ants follow commands unthinkingly—indeed the quote written above the ant nest reads "EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY." During Wart's time as an ant, the ant nest declares war on a neighboring ant nest. However, the justifications given for battle are highly illogical and paradoxical: from "We are more numerous than they are, therefore we have a right to their mash[food]," to "They are more numerous than we are, therefore they are wickedly trying to steal our mash"; or "We are a mighty race and have a natural right to subjugate their puny one" to "They are a mighty race and are unnaturally trying to subjugate our inoffensive one." Once the time for the war comes, Wart has become so sickened, not even by their wickedness, but by the terrible monotony, so as to kill the joy of life of his boyhood.

At the beginning of the second book, "The Queen of Air and Darkness," Merlyn teaches Arthur about the wickedness of war—about how in the future men believed it is wrong to fight in wars of any sorts—and how there is only one fairly good reason to fight and that is if the other man starts it. This lesson and conversations along this vein determine both how Arthur will come to consider the role of war, but also the stance the book takes towards war.

White was a conscientious objector during WWII—the period in which he wrote the majority of this novel. The novel maintains an anti-war stance—running contrary to the traditional Arthurian canon. White seeks to illustrate that war,

as the ultimate wielding of violence, is neither heroic nor chivalrous. Rather, he sees it as barbaric, violent and only justifiable as the last measure to uphold justice and protect the weak. To some degree, this attitude is a marked statement against the use of propaganda during World War II. In order to keep up morale, the allies would rotate false photographs of battlefields to show the chivalry and heroisms of the allied troops. But, as White illustrates with his depiction of war in *The Once and Future King*, the ideal of war is false; war is not a chivalric pursuit but should be something simply necessary as a means of defending justice and peace.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE QUESTING BEAST AND QUESTS

The Questing Beast and the Quest are two very different sides to the same idea. The Questing Beast is a physical representation of the Quest, but illustrates the absurdity of knightly questing where King Pellinore's search for the Questing Beast is simply a game that has no ultimate goal to it. The Quest—the journey the Knights undergo to find the **Holy Grail**—is instead a series of tests where the ultimate goal is not to find the Holy Grail (as it seems to entail) but to endure spiritual tests and perfect the soul. The Quest requires a degree of discipline that many of the knights are unable to exercise. Ultimately, however, the Quest symbolizes a process—just as the Questing Beast was a type of process for King Pellinore that culminates in him falling in love with the Queen of Flanders' daughter—to enlighten the self and ultimately reform the realm itself.



THE HOLY GRAIL

The Holy Grail is a dish, plate or cup said to have been used by Jesus at the Last Supper and is an important symbol in the Arthurian myth. The Holy Grail represents the unattainable perfection that Arthur's knights must strive towards. In Book III, *The Ill-Made Knight*, Arthur sends his knights out on a quest for The Holy Grail in the hope that the search may teach them morality and justice, and direct their violence and power towards a spiritual end. Ultimately, however, this fails: out of the three knights who eventually find the Grail, only one returns. The other two knights—Sir Percival and Sir Galahad—become too perfect for life itself and are unable to use their achieved perfection for justice in the realm. Thus, the Holy Grail represents not only spiritual perfection, but also the human perfection Arthur believes is fundamental to humanity. Arthur's quest for a just England is based on his

assumption that man is ultimately good; but this assumption turns out to be false as a perfect man cannot exist (just as Sir Galahad and Percival die when they reach perfection) and hence is permanently unattainable for Arthur, just as the Holy Grail forever remains elusive.



THE ROUND TABLE

In Book II, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, Arthur devises the idea of the Round Table. The Round Table is integral to his concept of Might vs. Right; Arthur wants to find a way to harness the power of Might to ensure Right, so that violence is only ever committed to uphold justice. Fundamental to this idea is the Order of the Round Table—a sort of club where knights keep true to the values of justice and morality to be a part of the Order. The Round Table is conceived as a mechanism for maintaining equality between the knights and so they do not squabble over rank. The Round Table becomes a symbol throughout the novel for Arthur's idea of justice—its literal non-hierarchical form symbolizes Arthur's quest to uphold morality and dissolve the superficial, hierarchical system of chivalry.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ace Books edition of *The Once and Future King* published in 1987.

Book 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ The Wart was not a proper son. He did not understand this, but it made him feel unhappy, because Kay seemed to regard it as making him inferior in some way...Besides, he admired Kay and was a born follower. He was a hero-worshipper.

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart, Sir Kay

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis


After a storm, the Wart and Kay (two boys who are being raised in the castle of Sir Ector, Kay's father and Wart's guardian) go out falconing -- with Kay carrying the falcon Cully, as usual. Kay typically dominates Wart, who, according to the narrator, is "a born follower" and "hero-worshipper." The narrator is not oblivious to the irony of this statement; he has already alluded to the fact that the Wart's actual name is Arthur (when he acknowledged that Art, which rhymes with Wart, "was short for his real name").

Already, the sometimes satirical narrator is mocking medieval British traditions of knighthood and of King Arthur; the most influential king in history began as a submissive boy, not as a precocious or bold one, as often happens in medieval folktales and legends. As *The Once and Future King* opens, we can begin to appreciate the way that the narrator layers the content of this story with humor, wit, and a dose of disbelief.

Book 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ Before the clink there were just the beeches, but immediately afterward there was a knight in full armor, standing still and silent and unearthly, among the majestic trunks...All was moonlit, all silver, too beautiful to describe.

Related Characters: King Pellinore

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

As Wart begins to imagine that he will be lost forever in the Old England wood where he is traveling after losing sight of Kay, he beholds a knight, who the narrator details with uncustomary reverence ("all was moonlight, all silver, too beautiful to describe"). Wart experiences a moment of rapture, in which the knight appears to live up to all of the expectations associated with a knight from Arthurian times. Visually, the knight does indeed fulfill such expectations -- he is "in full armor," and fully appears to be an extraordinary figure. As the knight begins to act in this scene, however, the features of this now-majestic appearance (such as the visor, which will droop, the lance, which the knight will drop) will quickly begin to become ridiculous.

Book 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Now ordinary people are born forwards in Time, if you understand what I mean and nearly everything in the world goes forward too...But I unfortunately was born at the wrong end of time, and I have to live backwards from in front, while surrounded by a lot of people living forwards from behind. Some people call it having second sight.

Related Characters: Merlyn (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 35


Explanation and Analysis

Merlyn curiously knew to set two places at the table even before Wart entered his cottage, and Wart is not tentative about questioning Merlyn about this during their lively breakfast conversation. Merlyn, in response, asks Wart to draw a W in a looking-glass. When Wart only succeeds in drawing an M, Merlyn explains his unusual request: Merlyn experiences time in a distorted, reversed way and experiences time backwards. This, the first of Merlyn's lessons to Wart, introduces Merlyn's unconventional methods of teaching -- which will become even more supernatural and unusual as the narrative continues. It also calls into question traditional notions about time, fate, and destiny; Merlyn's ever-present foreknowledge creates disturbances in these seemingly unquestionable phenomena.

Book 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ There is only power. Power is of the individual mind, but the mind's power is not enough. Power of the body decides everything in the end, and only Might is Right.

Related Characters: Mr. P (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

During the Wart's first lesson, in which Merlyn turns both of them into fish, the Wart meets the "King of the Moat," who symbolizes an "absolute monarch" and proclaims that "Power of the body" ("Might") is more powerful and significant than any intellectual effort or a consideration of broader social factors and justice ("Right"). Yet, just as this large fish seems about to devour Wart, Merlyn turns both of them back into human beings; this climax of the lesson teaches that "Right" action (which allows for intellectual, social, and other forms of effort) can indeed overcome physical, brute force. The narrator's description of this fish king as representing an "absolute monarch" solidifies how this teaching (and all of Merlyn's subsequent teachings, which rely on different animal mediums to illustrate other lessons) is intended to inform Arthur's future as a leader. If the reader was in any doubt that Wart will become the legendary Arthur, this scene is bound to eradicate that questioning.

Book 1, Chapter 23 Quotes

☞ The Wart walked up to the great sword for the third time. He put out his right hand softly and drew it out as gently as a scabbard.

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis



Wart cannot find Kay's sword, which he has forgotten, so he goes up to a sword which is stuck in the anvil of a stone in a church courtyard. Wart twice fails to remove the sword from this stone, but before his third try, he speaks aloud, asking Merlyn to help him. Immediately after Wart makes this request, "hundreds of old friends" (the animals from his lessons with Merlyn) surround and encourage him, giving tips and instructions on ways Wart can more easily remove the sword. He does not seem to use the specifics of their instructions, but rather pulls the sword out smoothly and easily, as if it is his fate. This action, of course, is the mythical removal of Excalibur, the "sword in the stone," and the moment Arthur is revealed as king.

phase, where antagonists such as Kay may not become truthful at the end (as Kay did, when he admitted that he had not pulled the sword out of the stone) and hostility that was previously unimaginable may occur within an entire kingdom.

Book 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ Gareth was a generous boy. He hated the idea of strength against weakness. It made his heart swell, as if he were going to suffocate. Gawaine, on the other hand, was angry because it had been against his family. He did not think it was wrong for strength to have its way, but only that it was intensely wrong for anything to succeed against his own clan.

Related Characters: Gareth, Gawaine

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis



As the Cornwall children -- Gareth, Gawaine, Gaheris, and Agravaire -- discuss how Uther Pendragon forced their grandmother, Igraine the Countess of Cornwall, to marry him, each child has a slightly different reaction. These momentary reactions reveal the personalities of these individuals, who will become knights of Arthur's court. They will (and already do) provide a unique perspective on the narrative's themes of brute strength, chivalry, and moral conduct -- themes which remain potent throughout as serious issues, despite the narrator's penchant for humor and irony.

In addition to introducing these characters, though, this scene also more fundamentally forces the narrative to pivot away from the childhood story of Arthur developing his leadership capacities. We now see the Cornwalls' antagonism towards Arthur's descendants, which forebodes their potential antagonism towards Arthur. We begin to see the reasons Arthur had to develop such strong leadership capabilities in the first book; his kingdom is already threatened by hatred and discontent.

Book 1, Chapter 24 Quotes

☞ I know all about your birth and parentage, and who gave you your real name. I know the sorrows before you, and the joys, and how there will never again be anybody who dares to call you by the friendly name of Wart. In future it will be your glorious doom to take up the burden and to enjoy the nobility of your proper title.

Related Characters: Merlyn (speaker), King Arthur or Wart

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator comically describes Wart's coronation as it would appear to a boy; it was an occasion where Wart was lucky enough to receive wonderful gifts. Yet, after the coronation has ended, Merlyn suddenly appears next to Arthur and reveals that he knew all about Arthur's true name and title (or, in other words, Arthur's fate as the King of Camelot). Merlyn renames Wart as King Arthur in the last lines of the narrative's first book, moving the story beyond its childhood phase and into a more complicated

Book 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ What is all this chivalry, anyway? It simply means being rich enough to have a castle and a suit of armor, and then, when you have them, you make the Saxon people do what you like.

Related Characters: Merlyn (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis


As Arthur and Merlyn stand on the castle battlements at Camelot, Arthur begins a conversation about a recent battle by calling it "lovely" and claiming that it is "nice" to rule as king and maintain his authority over such battles. Merlyn questions him on this, and takes a more sober view of the battle, asking Arthur how many of his footmen died -- a fact which Arthur does not remember, so Merlyn supplies the knowledge that seven hundred of Arthur's men (and none of his knights) were killed. Merlyn comments that the defeated enemies will merely come back, even stronger, and that Arthur is only acting exactly like his father when he enjoys such prospects of warfare. From remarking on Arthur's father, Merlyn then expands to the idea of chivalry more generally, asking a contemporary audience's questions about the nature of chivalry during Arthur's time.

Merlyn inserts a modern, skeptical attitude; like a contemporary reader, Merlyn is far enough removed from medieval chivalric society to notice that its leaders are only created by material wealth and military might, not any kind of divine right or moral superiority. Merlyn momentarily seems to reject the same hierarchical society that controls medieval life (which he, too, is a part of). Similarly, Merlyn notes that chivalry revolves around needless warfare, inserting a pacifistic element into the narrative as well (a crucial theme for White).

Book 2, Chapter 10 Quotes

☪ "Even if I wanted to," said Merlyn "it would be no good. There is a thing about Time and Space which the philosopher Einstein is going to find out. Some people call it destiny."

Related Characters: Merlyn (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 286


Explanation and Analysis

At Bedegraine, during the night before Arthur's battle with King Lot, Arthur and Merlyn have a "chat," a seemingly unimportant exchange that will nevertheless clarify the title of the novel. Before this, though, Merlyn fears that he has forgotten to tell Arthur something important. Instead of

remembering, he tells Arthur a parable about the inevitability of death and destiny. In response, Arthur asks if this inevitability applies to Merlyn, who can know the future and knows how Nimue will attempt to trap him. According to Merlyn, no one can avoid the future -- not even Merlyn -- because of the fundamental physics of the world. This passage also offers, of course, another humorous juxtaposition of modern concepts with ancient mythology.

☪ I will tell you something else, King, which may be a surprise for you. It will not happen for hundreds of years, but both of us are going to come back. Do you know what is going to be written on your tombstone? *Hic jacet Arthurus Rex quondam Rexque futurus*. Do you remember your latin? It means the once and future king.

Related Characters: Merlyn (speaker), King Arthur or Wart

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 287


Explanation and Analysis

As Merlyn continues conversing with Arthur the night before the battle at Bedegraine, he claims he will "tell you something else." This inauspicious start leads into one of the most clarifying moments of the narrative, when Merlyn explains why it is titled "The Once and Future King." Arthur is indeed a king of the past, present and future; his existence was predicted by legend, he exists now, and apparently he will "come back," again. This reveals how Arthur's story, and his tragic death, does not entirely belong to the medieval era which the narrative focuses on; it is a broader pattern, indicative of enduring human truth.

Book 2, Chapter 12 Quotes

☪ But Arthur had a different idea in his head. It did not seem to him to be sporting, after all, that eighty thousand humble men should be leu'd against each other while a fraction of their numbers...manoeuvred for the sake of ransom. He had begun to set a value on heads, shoulders and arms—their owner's value, even if the owner was a serf.

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 297

Explanation and Analysis

At the battle of Bedegraine, Lot's forces fight in the "Norman way," the traditional medieval way in which noblemen engage in sport (more like "foxhunting" than fighting) while commoners engage in deadly warfare that creates a martial background for the knights. Because of Merlyn's instruction, Arthur sees how brutal this sort of combat is, and he inspires his forces to engage in the most brutal and barbaric form of warfare possible. In doing so, he reveals the intrinsic barbarism of medieval fighting; he paradoxically advocates for more pacifistic forms of fighting through making his army display the brutality of medieval battle at its finest.

Book 2, Chapter 13 Quotes

☛☛ The way to use a Spancel was this. You had to find the man you loved while he was asleep. Then you had to throw it over his head without waking him, and tie it in a bow...Queen Morgause stood in the moonlight, drawing the Spancel through her fingers.

Related Characters: Queen Morgause, King Arthur or Wart

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 306


Explanation and Analysis

As Morgause prepares to return to England, she is sure to bring the supernatural Spancel, a magical piece of human flesh which can make a man "fall in love" with the woman who wields it and places it around his head. Morgause even sinisterly runs her fingers over the spancel -- an act which visually suggests that her spancel will have a terrible symbolic significance in the story. Antagonists such as Morgause (and the later Mordred) often act with such clearly malicious intentions; the novel certainly gives us plainly evil figures, in addition to contradictory persons such as Lancelot, who destabilize this binary between good and evil.

Book 2, Chapter 14 Quotes

☛☛ Although nine tenths of the story seems to be about knights jousting and quests for the holy grail and things of that sort, the narrative is a whole, and it deals with the reasons why the young man came to grief at the end. It is the tragedy, the Aristotelian and comprehensive tragedy, of sin coming home to roost.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 312


Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator informs the reader that Morgause will give birth to Mordred, a boy who is conceived from a brother and sister having sexual intercourse, he shows the flawed pedigree which reveals King Arthur's relations with Morgause. Only after providing this illustration does the narrator directly state that his story stems from Malory's famous "The Death of Arthur"; both of these narratives center around this inappropriate sexual encounter. (Although it's worth noting that White seems to conflate Malory's characters of Morgan le Fay and Queen Margawse into one wholly evil character, Morgause.) The stories may seem to be diversified by other, chivalric elements -- "knights jousting and quests for the holy grail and things of that sort" -- they are most completely about sin, the force which will destroy these social conventions that make up the framework for King Arthur's court. This story is more than its particular historical setting; it is a fundamental, human tragedy, a literary form with strong roots back to Ancient Greek drama.

Book 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

☛☛ The boy [Lancelot] thought there was something wrong with him. All through his life—even when he was a great man with the world at his feet—he was to feel this gap: something at the bottom of his heart of which he was aware, and ashamed, but which he did not understand.

Related Characters: Sir Lancelot

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

Two years after Lancelot begins his training to hopefully excel as a knight in King Arthur's court, he feels frustrated by his stagnation; he has not yet become knighted, and he has not yet become as close to Arthur as he wishes to be. Here, he rides towards Camelot with this discouragement and with this curious jealousy of Arthur's wife Guenever, which will transform into another secretive yet even more dangerous emotion as the narrative continues. As the

narrator describes this scene, he mentions that Lancelot was “jealous” and “ashamed”; as ever, he is torn between two of his emotions. Our narrator also curiously calls Lancelot a “hero-worshipper,” just as he described Arthur (as Wart) in the novel’s first chapter. This begins to create a curiously potent relation between these two knights – the king of them all, and the finest of them all – that will contribute to the ruin of the kingdom.

Book 3, Chapter 6 Quotes

☛☛ For one thing, he [Lancelot] liked to hurt people. It was for the strange reason that he was cruel, that the poor fellow never killed a man who asked for mercy, or committed a cruel action which he could have prevented. One reason why he fell in love with Guenever was because the first thing he had done was to hurt her. He might never have noticed her as a person, if he had not seen the pain in her eyes.

Related Characters: Sir Lancelot, Queen Guenever

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 339



Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator describes the Roman campaign, in which Lancelot emerged as the finest fighter in Arthur’s army, he dwells on Lancelot’s character, reflecting on the ways that people from later times interpret Lancelot. Lancelot is inherently contradictory, like the medieval knight, a figure who was simultaneously supposed to excel at the harshest martial combat and the gentler conquest of love, according to chivalric notions. Indeed, the narrator directly associates Lancelot with such knights (“he was a knight with medieval respect for honour”). In this context, it appears slightly less odd that Lancelot fell in love with Guenever because he hurt her; this contradiction merely underscores the essential nature of the accomplished medieval knight, who is supposed to perfectly balance both violence and love.

Book 3, Chapter 16 Quotes

☛☛ The effect of such an education was that he had grown up without any of the useful accomplishments for living—without malice, vanity, suspicion, cruelty, and the commoner forms of selfishness. Jealousy seemed to him the most ignoble forms of vices. He was sadly unfitting for hating his best friend or for torturing his wife.

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 389

Explanation and Analysis

Before the narrator starts to detail an encounter between Lancelot and Arthur in the rose garden, in which they only discuss Elaine, our narrator informs us that Arthur does indeed have a sense of Guenever and Lancelot’s inappropriate attraction towards each other. But again, the narrator claims that Arthur is still controlled by Merlyn’s teachings; Merlyn taught him the importance of love, justice, and simplicity, and Arthur cannot move beyond these principles enough to accuse his best friend or wife of infidelity, or even to punish them. It is Merlyn, not Arthur, who wields the power of the kingdom – and even controls Arthur’s own mind. This results in Arthur lacking the ability to exert his influence over Lancelot and Guenever, but only because of a kind of moral purity on his part. Even Arthur’s feelings are merely what “completed the misery of the court”; this suggestive phrasing allows us to realize that Arthur is a king without some kinds of the control associated with the crown.

Book 3, Chapter 18 Quotes

☛☛ "Arthur," he [Lancelot] said. Then he gave a loud shriek, and jumped straight out of the window, which is on the first floor. They could hear him crash into some bushes, with a crump and crackle of boughs, and then he was running off through the trees and the shrubbery with a loud sort of warbling cry, like hounds hunting.

Related Characters: Sir Lancelot (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 396

Explanation and Analysis



The previous night, Lancelot was with Elaine, thinking that she was Guenever. In her anger, Guenever summons both Lancelot and Elaine to come to her in the following morning. Once they have arrived, Guenever calls Elaine an animal and orders Lancelot to go. He certainly does; he cries "Arthur," and then jumps out of the window and runs away through the wooded area, rather like an animal. His loyalties to Arthur and Guenever have proven too difficult for him to handle as a man, and he reverts to madness for some time,

fitting in to a medieval trope (fleeing the court and becoming a wandering madman for a while) and escaping from his personal inner contradictions.

Book 3, Chapter 26 Quotes

☹️ Lancelot looked uncomfortable. He had an instinctive dislike for Mordred, and did not like having it...He disliked Mordred irrationally, as a dog dislikes a cat—and he felt ashamed of the dislike, because it was a confused principle of his to help the younger Knights.

Related Characters: Sir Lancelot, Mordred

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 427



Explanation and Analysis


Shortly before Gareth tells Arthur and Lancelot that Mordred, Agravaire, and Gawaine have killed Morgause and Sir Pellinore for having sexual relations, the king and his best friend are conversing in general about the gossip and characters of "these decadent days" (these remarkably peaceful times). Yet even this peaceful, pleasant discussion is marred by the existence of malice in Arthur's court, particularly in Morgause and Mordred, as usual. Lancelot instinctively feels Mordred's evil, although in typical Lancelot fashion, he feels rather confused and conflicted about this because he is impelled to help Arthur's knights who are younger than him. Lancelot's mistrust of Mordred is natural, "instinctive" - "as a dog dislikes a cat." This fact, like Merlyn's lessons, points to the connectedness of human society and nature, and suggests that the simple, penetrating power of animal instinct has much to offer over-complicated human society.

Book 3, Chapter 27 Quotes

☹️ Simple because we have got justice. We have achieved what we were fighting for, and now we still have the fighters on our hands. Don't you see what has happened? We have run out of things to fight for, so all the fighters of the Table are going to rot.

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 433

Explanation and Analysis

Gareth informs Lancelot and Arthur that Mordred, Agravaire, and Gawaine have killed their mother Morgause and Sir Pellinore for having sexual relations with each other, but this does not spur Arthur to punish these three knights. Rather, it inspires him to pinpoint a flaw in the Round Table, which he had begun to notice before: his knights are growing restless, having "run out of things to fight for." The Round Table has served its purpose, to establish "justice" in the kingdom, and Arthur's court must occupy itself with another project of sorts. It is in this vacuity that Lancelot suggests the Quest for the Holy Grail – a quest reminiscent of the Quest for the Questing Beast, to the reader; a quest which (like all others) may not serve an actual purpose at all, but will hopefully keep the knights from starting fights with each other.

Book 3, Chapter 36 Quotes

☹️ Half the knights had been killed—the best half. What Arthur had feared from the start of the Grail Quest had come to pass. If you achieve perfection, you die. There had been nothing left for Galahad to ask of God, except death. The best knights had gone to perfection, leaving the worst to hold their sieges.

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart, Sir Galahad

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 477

Explanation and Analysis



The narrator categorizes different parts of Arthur's reign into four main feelings, or "tones": the "companionship of youth," when knights and the Round Table were young, the "chivalric rivalry," which blossomed after the threats to the kingdom had been eradicated, the "enthusiasm of the Grail," and now the bleakest yet -- the "knowledge of the world" phase, one of intrigue and gossip and "the fruits of achievement." With the context of this timeline established, the narrator suggests that the current moment is a critical time, in which half of the "best knights" have been killed. Again, the narrator associates destiny with death; once you live out your destined perfection, "you die," according to the narrator's blunt appraisal, which seems to stem from

Malory's "Le Morte d'Arthur" itself.

Book 3, Chapter 43 Quotes

☞ Nobody knows what they said to each other. Malory says that "they made either to other their complaints of many diverse things." Probably they agreed that it was impossible to love Arthur and also to deceive him. Probably Lancelot made her understand about his God at last, and she made him understand about her missing children. Probably they agreed to accept their guilty love as ended.

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart, Sir Lancelot, Queen Guenever

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 503



Explanation and Analysis

At Meliagrance's castle, Lancelot arrives and Guenever "won the battle by mistake"; she had allowed Lancelot to live apart from her, pursuing holiness and religious piety, and this relenting had spurred Lancelot to come back to her. They become lovers again, and Lancelot goes to the window of Guenever's inner room, where she meets him and they converse. The narrator does not reveal the nature of this exchange; instead he provides us with Malory's description, and then speculates on what "probably" transpired between the two of them. The two lovers "probably" discussed the reasons against their behavior – Lancelot's God and Guenever's "missing children" – before Lancelot completely breaks the window and comes in anyways. This suggests that the "old electric message" between Lancelot and Guenever's eyes creates a kind of inevitable attraction between the two of them, which makes their lovemaking a matter of destiny, despite their best attempts to avoid such inappropriate behavior.

Book 4, Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ Did you know that in these dark ages which were visible from Guenever's window, there was so much decency in the world that the Catholic Church could impose a peace to all their fighting—which it called The Truce of God—and which lasted from Wednesday to Monday, as well as during the whole of Advent and Lent?

Related Characters: Queen Guenever



Related Themes:  

Page Number: 539

Explanation and Analysis

As Lancelot and Guenever together gaze at Arthur's kingdom, the narrator proclaims that these two individuals are classic medieval lovers, people who have lived and loved for many years, although they are aged and might not seem to be lovers in the modern sense. This tone of nostalgia continues as the narrator expands his focus to the land that Lancelot and Guenever are seeing; the narrator admiringly recalls the "decency" which existed in these older times, "these dark ages." This general "decency" (or, more likely, fear of God) allowed the Catholic Church to forbid fighting during the "The Truce of God," from Wednesday to Sunday. Although barbaric fighting, the likes of which is now usually unseen, might have occurred from Monday to Wednesday, for the majority of the week all forms of violence were forbidden. This contradictory co-existence of pacifism and violence is evocative of Arthur's reign, which accomplished peace through revealing the depth of brutality in medieval forms of conflict.

☞ Do you think that they with their Battles, Famine, Black Death and Serfdom were less enlightened than we are, with our Wars, Blockade, Influenza and conscription? Even if they were foolish enough to believe that the earth was the center of the universe, do not we ourselves believe that man is the fine flower of creation? If it takes millions of years for a fish to become a reptile, has Man, in our few hundred, altered out of recognition?

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 539

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has maintained a contemporary perspective and added in anachronistic references throughout the narrative, but here he quite explicitly juxtaposes specifics of modern and medieval life ("Wars, Blockade, Influenza and Conscription" against "Battles, Famine, Black Death, and Serfdom) before the narrative moves into "the sundown of chivalry," when such crystallized comparisons become more difficult. He argues that we are, indeed, not more "enlightened" than medieval individuals, even after philosophical movements such as the Enlightenment. All humanity has been and is driven by a sense of pride, an

intuition that human people are (or, at least, should be) the “center” of all things – a more communal version of the sin that contributed to the downfall of Arthur’s kingdom.

☝ “You see, Lance, I have to be absolutely just. I can't afford to have any more things like those babies on my conscience. The only way I can keep clear of force is by justice. Far from being willing to execute his enemies, a real king must be willing to execute his friends.”

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart (speaker), King Arthur or Wart, Sir Lancelot

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 550



Explanation and Analysis

In Guenever's solar (private upper chamber), Lancelot, Guenever, and Arthur sit during the “sundown of chivalry” and discuss the problem of Mordred -- how Mordred was conceived by Morgause and Arthur, and likely bears hatred that threatens Arthur's kingdom. Although Arthur should perhaps kill Mordred preemptively, as Lancelot advocates (and as Arthur tried to do long ago, and ended up killing many innocent babies instead), Arthur claims that he cannot do so because he is king and must act according to justice. This scene is overwhelmingly ironic; at this very moment, Arthur is purposefully neglecting to punish Lancelot and Guenever. He only follows the principle of justice so strictly when it does not interfere with his powerful but simple loyalty to his best friend and wife.

Book 4, Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ Anybody who had not seen him [Mordred] for a month or two would have known at once that he was mad—but his brains had gone so gradually that those who lived with him failed to see it.

Related Characters: Mordred

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 611

Explanation and Analysis



At Carlisle, Guenever is embroidering with Agnes, who makes it clear that she does not trust Mordred, who has been named Lord Protector of England. Agnes jokes that

she believes Mordred is there at the window, listening to them, and Guenever is struck by a horrid instinct that Agnes' instinct is probably correct. Indeed, once they open the door, Mordred is actually there. He has slowly turned mad; his hatred towards Arthur and lust for power are as poisonous for himself as they are for the kingdom. Mordred's mental decay, like England's ruin, occurs “slowly”; it is not a singular act, which can be counteracted or prevented, but rather is a gradual progression towards a certain inevitable date.

Book 4, Chapter 14 Quotes

☝ What was Right, what was Wrong? What distinguished Doing from Not Doing? If I were to have my time again, the old King thought, I would bury myself in a monastery for fear of a Doing which might lead to woe.

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 631

Explanation and Analysis

Arthur sits, dejected, at his pavilion in Salisbury, occupied by his thoughts. He is “nearly dead,” primarily existing in his reflections instead of acting in the world. The narrator lists Arthur's many complaints -- about his wife, his best friend, his son, his Round Table, his country -- but then claims that Arthur's intense dejection is due to his disappointment in humanity. Arthur had learned, from Merlyn, that humanity was “decent,” but this lesson has proven tragically, terribly false. This contrast between belief and reality is incredibly depressing.

Arthur wonders “Why do men fight?” and then moves to a fundamental binary of the book: that of Might vs. Right. Here, as the narrative slows to a close, we have our answer: Right cannot be above Might (as Arthur once thought) because Right is an unstable, uncertain construct -- one can never know all the consequences of any action or decision.

☝ There would be a day—there must be a day—when he would come back to Gramayre with a new Round Table which had no corners, just as the world had none—a table without boundaries between the nations who would sit to feast there. The hope of making it would lie in culture.

Related Characters: King Arthur or Wart

Related Themes:**Related Symbols:****Page Number:** 639**Explanation and Analysis**

The very end of this narrative is fittingly tragic; Arthur only comes to his most significant realization after he has already sent a page (the future Malory, who writes “Le Morte d’Arthur”) to share the ideals which founded the Round Table with the rest of the world. Malory’s famous text, thus,

cannot express Arthur’s most important realization. When Arthur remembers Merlyn, the character whose beliefs and lessons seem to control so much of Arthur’s actions and Arthur’s very self, Arthur finally understands that wars occur for fictitious reasons and national boundaries are merely imaginary lines. For Arthur’s Round Table to be effective, it would have to be truly “cornerless,” not affected and divided by geographical or national divisions. Arthur sees why the Round Table failed, at last – right before he dies. Death and destiny have the ultimate power, over men’s little attempts at reason and right.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 1

Two young boys in medieval England, Wart and Kay, live in the Castle of the Forest Sauvage. Kay is the son of the lord of the castle, Sir Ector. While Wart is an adopted orphan who's real name is Arthur (Kay gave him the nickname Wart). Kay doesn't have a nickname—he is too dignified for one, given that he is Sir Ector's real son and will be a knight one day, whereas Wart will only be his squire.

Sir Ector has recently gotten rid of their governess (she had a bout of hysterics and was committed to a lunatic asylum) and so is concerned with the boys' education. While sharing some port with Sir Grummore Grummerson—a visiting Knight—the two men decide that the boys need a tutor and agree that they must **quest** for a new one.

It is July and hay-making season—the July weather of Old England where men turn brown in the sun. Every man, woman and child works in the fields during hay-making, even the boys, and Sir Ector stands atop a cart to supervise. Although Sir Ector mostly hinders the procedure and it is his assistants who make sure everything runs smoothly.

One afternoon, the two boys slip away to play and decide to take Cully the Hawk to catch rabbits. They go to the Mews where the hawks are kept. When Cully only glares in response to Kay's call to come, Kay, impatient, grabs him. Wart says nothing. Although he often disagrees with Kay's conduct, Wart doesn't speak up about it because Kay is older than him and Sir Ector's proper son. Besides, Wart worships Kay.

Walking across the fields, Wart suggests that they not fly Cully as they hadn't correctly roused him. Kay brushes this off. Wart itches to take Cully, but thinks how annoying it would be for Kay to hear the preachings of a younger, inferior boy. Kay threw his arms upwards to make the hawk take off and Cully swooped into the air. The hawk looked down at his masters, angrily—Kay had forced him to take off—and flies off away from the boys, ignoring their calls.

The novel opens by describing the daily lives of the medieval youths and establishes the complex relationship between Wart and Kay—Kay has given Wart a derogatory nickname, but will not let Wart give him one in return. Kay is very aware of his superior status (being both older and of noble birth) and thus patronizes Wart who only worships Kay unquestioningly.



Sir Ector and Sir Grummore Grummerson, although established knights, are ridiculous characters (even Sir Grummore's name is comedic) who act like a 'quest' is both commonplace and a game because here the objective of the quest is finding a tutor rather than seeking some higher truth (what a quest traditionally entails).



Sir Ector is a bumbling idiot—he is the figure of highest authority but his rule is carried out by those underneath him, as illustrated with the hay-making. We expect Sir Ector to be chivalrous, being an experienced knight, but instead he is satirized.



Although Wart is right to disagree with Kay, Kay still dismisses Wart because he does not want to defer to an inferior; Wart meanwhile demonstrates beliefs of integrity and morality but is unable to insist upon them because of his unwavering acceptance of Kay's superiority.



Throughout White's description of this incident, he refers in detail to the peculiarity of medieval pursuits—for example, how there is a specific way of flying a hawk. These details accentuate the reader's alienation from the novel's setting and the feeling of immersion in a strange and comic world.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 2

After a while, Kay loses his temper and returns home, leaving Wart to retrieve the hawk. As Cully flies from tree to tree, Wart tracks him deeper into the forest. Soon Wart finds himself farther from the castle than he's ever been before—on the edge of the true forest, one of the great forests of Old England; filled with wild boars, wolves, wicked animals, and outlaws.

As it gets dark, Wart curls up at the foot of the tree that Cully has settled in. Just as Wart is drifting off, he hears a rapid whirr and finds an arrow between the fingers of his right hand. Wart quickly hides behind the tree as another arrow buries its feathers in the grass. Wart finds he is not afraid of his attacker but he soon realizes that now he has lost Cully and wanders off aimlessly through the forest. He comes upon a clearing; suddenly a knight appears in full armor. He is mounted on an enormous white horse and carries a jousting lance in his right hand. All was moonlight, silver and too beautiful to describe.

Wart approaches the knight, who jumps and raises his visor, revealing a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. He tries to wipe his glasses, only to drop his lance and then have his visor fall down accidentally. When Wart reveals that he is lost, the knight responds that he too is lost. He says that his name is King Pellinore and he's been chasing the **Questing Beast** for seventeen years.

The **Questing Beast**, according to King Pellinore, has the head of a serpent, the body of a leopard, and the haunches of a lion. King Pellinore, growing sadder, says he hasn't seen the beast for eight months and never has anywhere warm to sleep. Wart invites Pellinore back to Sir Ector's castle where he could get a warm bed, hoping Pellinore would know the way. Pellinore is excited at the prospect of a feather bed and soft pillows.

Suddenly, they hear a loud noise. Sure it's the **Questing Beast**, Pellinore grabs his lance and gallops after it. He quickly gets tangled in a tree, but frees himself and disappears into the gloom, leaving Wart alone.

Wart acts valiantly and is the true chivalrous figure because he stays with the hawk; yet we know that Kay will become a knight and Wart only his squire—White's emphasis on the discrepancies between the two characters illustrates the superficiality of knighthood.



Wart is now truly on a quest of his own, lost in the woods and yet fearless. This encounter is Wart's first meeting with a knight dressed in full armor. White's description of the knight is idealized and romanticized; the knight is depicted as unearthly because all his features are disguised and his sudden appearance seems magical.



The romanticized image of the knight falls apart because of King Pellinore's comedic portrayal—he is clumsy and wearing spectacles. By emphasizing his clownish actions, King Pellinore is a parody of the chivalrous knight and thus begins to subvert our expectations of the knightly ideal.



The 'questing beast' is representative of the entire questing genre: White conflates the journey component of the quest with the goal itself. Moreover the questing beast is itself a convoluted conflation of many different magical creatures. More absurd, King Pellinore will never catch the "questing beast" and so the endeavor becomes a game simply for the sake of questing.



King Pellinore's commitment to his quest wavers—he contemplates leaving it simply for a bed before once more getting caught up in the excitement. This lackadaisical commitment subverts both the knightly ideal and the questing genre (to which knights typically enact an almost religious commitment).



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 3

Wart sleeps in the forest. When he wakes he hears a sound and goes in search of it. Soon he finds a stone cottage in a clearing, and sees a very old man drawing water from a well. The man is dressed in a gown covered in zodiac signs and other symbols, is wearing a pointed hat, and carries a wand. As Wart approaches, the old man says, "Your name would be the Wart," and introduces himself as Merlyn.

Merlyn invites Wart into his cottage, in which there is a breakfast set for two. The room is full of books, lion claws, and other extraordinary objects. Merlyn takes off his hat to reveal a tawny, talking owl named Archimedes. As they eat, Wart asks Merlyn how he knew to set breakfast for two. Merlyn responds by asking Wart if he's ever tried to draw in a mirror, which, after Merlyn makes a mirror magically appear, turns out to be quite difficult. Ordinary people, Merlyn explains, are born forwards in Time. Merlyn, however, was born the wrong way in Time—he ages backwards, which is like trying to draw in a mirror.

After breakfast, Merlyn declares that it's high time they returned to Sir Ector. Wart is surprised, and then astonished and excited when Merlyn reveals that he is going to be Wart's tutor. "My," Wart exclaims, "I must have been on a **quest!**"

Wart's first meeting with Merlyn immediately draws attention to Merlyn's magical powers and the way Merlyn will call into question our notions of fate and time—here Merlyn already knew Wart's name and knew that they would meet that morning.



Now, we are fully introduced to Merlyn's peculiar relationship with time: by living time backwards, Merlyn already knows what will happen (or, for him, what has already happened). Traditionally, fate plays an integral role in the Arthurian myth; yet, here, Wart's future is not necessarily dictated by fate but rather by its own mythicism. For Merlyn, as for us, Arthur has already lived and we know what will happen because of the myth—thus it is not some grander force at play, but rather pre-conceived knowledge.



Wart accomplishes the quest set for him in Chapter 1—without him truly knowing he was on a quest.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 4

Wart, Merlyn, Archimedes and Cully return to the Castle Sauvage. Hob, the caretaker of the hawks, takes Cully after looking proudly at Wart. Wart explains how Merlyn had sent Archimedes to find Cully and then lured him back with a dead pigeon. Sir Ector comes bustling from the castle, reprimanding Wart but secretly proud of him for persevering and finding the hawk.

Wart declares that he has been successful on the **quest** for a tutor—he has found Merlyn, the great magician. Merlyn shows Sir Ector his references (including a tablet signed by Aristotle and a parchment signed by Hecate) before making the copper sky turn cold and produce inches of snow (Merlyn protects himself from the elements with an umbrella). Sir Ector, convinced of Merlyn's skills, agrees that he can be the boys' new tutor.

Wart gains approval from all the adults because of his commitment to finding Cully. This is the first time Wart's moral superiority to Kay is recognized by others and alludes to the hierarchical and superficial parameters of knighthood (which is determined simply by birth). The idea of chivalry is intrinsically linked to knighthood suggesting knights have an inherent morality; this conception is overturned here as we see knighthood is simply determined by hierarchy.



Merlyn shows off his magical skills and hints at what is to come (the 'lessons' Merlyn will give Wart). In this scene, Sir Ector is again the bumbling idiot: he has seemingly no clue of the requirements a tutor must fulfill and is easily convinced.



Sir Ector declares how amazing it was for Wart to accomplish a **quest** all on his own. Kay, fired by jealousy, dismisses the quest. To which Merlyn responds suddenly and rudely: "Kay, thou was ever a proud and ill-tongued speaker, and a misfortunate one. Thy sorrow will come from thine own mouth." Kay hangs his head; he is not really a bad person, but simply ambitious and passionate.

Kay's ego is angered by the attention being paid to Wart. Merlyn, up until now very calm, becomes enraged and foreshadows Kay's downfall. However, White (who is an active narrator throughout—commenting and making judgments) informs us that Kay is simply young and misguided.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 5

The Castle Sauvage, still standing today, is a paradise for a boy like Wart. More like a village than a castle, it has a moat and drawbridge and eight towers. Wart particularly likes the kennels where the Dog Boy lives. Dog Boy looks after the hounds and loves them more than people (his nose was bitten off as a child and he had been spurned by the other children ever since). One morning, Merlyn finds Wart with Dog Boy petting the hounds.

White's long, lyrical description of the Castle Sauvage draws particular attention to its age—this narrative aside highlights the historical underpinnings of Arthur's tale. The narrator's matter-of-fact treatment of Dog Boy's nose (in reality, a violent and traumatic experience) draws attention to the brutality of this idealized era—where something so violent is almost ordinary.



"I think it's about time we began lessons," Merlyn announces. It is hot, and Wart wishes he could swim in the moat instead. "I wish I were a fish" Wart moans. At which, Merlyn speaks strange words and, suddenly, Wart finds himself deep in the moat and transformed into a fish. Wart and Merlyn (also now a fish) swim along together—Merlyn teaching Wart how to swim properly.

This is the first of Wart's 'lessons' while under Merlyn's tutorage. Each of these lessons teaches Wart a specific lesson about the way to rule and will come to inform his innovative ruling methods when he becomes king.



Suddenly, a timid young roach (a type of fish) appears. He begins crying, and pleads with Merlyn to help his Mamma who has begun to swim upside down. The three find the roach's Mamma lying on her back and Merlyn swims around her, singing a strange song. Mrs. Roach suddenly rights herself and Merlyn and Wart continue on their adventure. Merlyn points out how Wart, who is acting carefree, should be as cautious here as in the forest: Merlyn is taking Wart to see the King of the Moat.

The lesson here (one of them) is that Wart should not be so accepting of his surroundings—he should not assume he is safe because there is no obvious danger. This very literal experience in the moat will hold true later in King Arthur's rule when he must learn not to trust people although they appear trustworthy.



Mr. P—the King of the Moat—is an enormous pike, almost four feet long with a face ravaged by cruelty and pride. He does not move, but simply looks at the pair with a remorseless eye. Wart does not know what to say, but Mr. P simply lectures on the power of the body and about the dominance of Might over Right. Suddenly, Mr. P declares it is time for them to leave; Wart, however, is hypnotized and does not notice the enormous mouth moving closer. On his last sentence, the pike's mouth opens wide and his large teeth gnash together. A second later, Wart is on dry land again, panting in the midday heat.

Wart's encounter with Mr. P is his first confrontation with Might v. Right. Mr. P is a tyrannical, almost psychotic fish who is the true representation of this flawed ideology: he believes entirely in the power of the body, so much so that, although he warns Wart he could get eaten, Mr. P is unable to control the instinctive urge of the body to kill and then tries to eat Wart.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 6

The boys are practicing their archery, while Merlyn sleeps off his lunch in the shade. Kay, as competitive as ever, is in a bad temper because he cannot hit a target. They decide to play Rovers instead (an archery game) and soon find themselves near the edge of the Savage forest where Cully had been lost. This time, Kay is lucky and takes a young rabbit with his arrow.

The pair gut the rabbit and turn to observe their Thursday afternoon ceremony: they each shoot a farewell arrow into the air. Wart's soars, swimming golden in the fading light, before a gore-crow flaps suddenly up and snatches the arrow in its jaws. Kay, frightened by this, declares it must be a witch. Wart is not frightened, but furious that his best arrow has been ruined.

Once more, Kay demonstrates his adolescent impatience and pride, while Wart is simply content to improve his technique. When Kay is finally lucky, Wart is simply happy for Kay—a very different reaction to Kay when Wart succeeds.



This scene is particularly symbolic: first, the appearance of the gore-crow literally foreshadows King Arthur's later feuds with the witch Morgause; moreover, this scene also symbolizes all King Arthur's doomed attempts to revolutionize England—his best, purest attempts will constantly be thwarted.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 7

It is nearing Autumn and Wart is lying in the shade with Merlyn while Kay has his tilting (jousting) lesson. Wart, sighing, thinks how nice it would be to be a knight like Kay. Wart describes how, if he were a knight, he would wear a large suit of black armor and ride a black horse, and how feared he would be by the other knights because of his jousting skill. Merlyn, unimpressed, suggests that they see some real knights errant—for the sake of Wart's education of course.

Wart finds himself deep in the Forest Sauvage with Merlyn at his side. King Pellinore emerges out of the gloom, shortly followed by Sir Grummore Grummerson wearing proper tilting garb and singing an old school song. The two share good-natured small talk before colloquially suggesting that they better joust. They decide they will joust for "the usual thing."

When they are fully armored, the two knights station themselves at opposite ends of the clearing. They proceed through a scripted, verbal altercation that culminates in them challenging the other to joust. The knights in full armor are enormously heavy and have to be carried by enormous horses; as a result, the speed at which they approach each other is cumbersome and slow. The ponderous horses walk towards one another and each knight holds out his lance; as they come together, both miss each other and Sir Grummore drives his spear straight into a tree.

Wart is still very much under the illusion of the knightly ideal, although it is clear Merlyn is not—every time Wart mentions knighthood, Merlyn remains silent and suggests a lesson of some sort. Merlyn teaches Wart by showing, not by telling him what to think. In this manner, Merlyn guides Wart, but Arthur is ultimately responsible for his own moral code.



King Pellinore and Sir Grummore joust because of some scripted argument. Knighthood and its practices appear stagnant; they are upheld simply for the sake of tradition and are not adapting to new ideas/conventions. In a way, Arthur's rule will come to act as a metaphorical quest to end this stagnation, which is also a form of moral stagnation.



The two knights here are simply farcical—the entire scene is satirical. White dismantles romanticized ideals of jousting—there is no speed, nor valiance. Instead the pair are simply bumbling idiots engaging in violence for no real reason. This scene depicts the ridiculous and light-hearted side of the moral stagnation of the mechanized ritual, the as the novel progresses the portrait of this stagnation will become darker and darker.



This blundering jousting continues until both are dismounted from their horses, at which point they proceed to fight with swords. However, because their armor is so heavy, the fight takes place as if in slow motion and eventually the pair throw away their swords and simply hurl their bodies at one another. After much name-calling and verbal altercations, they summon energy for one final encounter but only succeed in ramming into trees. With the knights lying stunned and motionless on the ground, Merlyn and Wart return to the Castle Sauvage.

During this very farcical scene, Wart remains entirely enthralled by the joust—he does not see the satire or farce of knighthood yet. Over time, Arthur will come to recognize this farce but he only learns to recognize it through Merlyn's lessons.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 8

Wart is moping in the castle. He goes to Merlyn in the hope of some education. Merlyn suggests that he try being a hawk and promptly turns Wart into a Merlin (a type of hawk). Before taking him to the Mews (where the Hawks live), Merlyn first warns Wart not to go near to Cully's special enclosure because he is not quite right in the brains. He also tells Wart to respect the Hawk hierarchy and how certain species must be treated with deference.

Wart's behavior at the beginning of this chapter reminds us of his youth—he is only a young child prone to bouts of immaturity. The lesson with the hawks is important because it teaches Wart about both the virtues and vices of hierarchy among a group of people.



All the other hawks are hooded, silent, and stately in the August moonlight in the Mews. A few moments after Merlyn had left Wart, there is a gentle ringing of a bell and the great peregrine falcon announces, "Gentlemen, you may converse." While Cully mutters nonsense at the end of the room, the other hawks enquire after the new officer. Wart announces himself and quickly says he is of the Yorkshire Merlins. He is then initiated through a series of questions ("What is a Beast of the Foot" etc.).

The process of initiation Wart must undergo as a hawk is much like the initiation of the knight. It seems—to the outsider—very unnecessary and peculiar. Moreover, in order to be accepted by the others, he must prove his ancestry and family (all of which Wart makes up on the spot). Again, using the position of the outsider, this emphasis on ancestry seems both odd and unfair.



Wart, passing the questions, is sworn in as a new officer and must now pass an ordeal. The other hawks debate and decide that Wart must stand by Colonel Cully while they ring the bell three times. Wart agrees (although he had been warned by Merlyn not to do just this) and proceeds to Cully's enclosure. While he stands near the cage, Cully whispers madly, telling Wart to move away from him; as the second bell rings, Cully moves closer to Wart and turns his mad, brooding eyes upon him. Just as the third bell rings, Cully lashes out his talons that fix themselves in Wart's side as he takes off into the air; but Wart manages to get free, leaving only his outer layer of feathers behind. To herald Wart's achievement, the hawks sing the Triumph Song.

Cully, the mad hawk, is a peculiar representation of might: he does not wish to hurt those around him but, much like Mr. P, is unable to resist the power and violence of his insanity. It is only because of the cage that he is unable to harm those weaker than him. Cully illustrates the blindness and insanity of unrestrained might. Meanwhile, Wart is celebrated for withstanding pain.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 9

Wart and Kay argue in the morning and Kay accuses Wart of sneaking out. They begin to fight and Kay, although bigger, is left with a bleeding nose and Wart with a black eye. Kay begins to sob and whimpers, "Merlyn does everything for you, but he never does anything for me." Wart feels awful and quickly scampers off to see Merlyn.

Merlyn lives in the tallest, most beautiful tower in the Castle Sauvage. Wart demands that Merlyn transform Kay, too, the next time he transforms Wart. In response, Merlyn simply tells the story of Elijah & Rabbi Jachanan: a fable about the different treatment of a poor man and a rich man by Elijah. The poor man's cow died after hosting Elijah, while the rich man got his wall repaired. It turns out the poor man's wife was decreed to die, but she was exchanged for the cow; while there was a chest of gold hidden in the wall the rich man would have found if his wall hadn't been repaired.

Merlyn explains that sometimes you cannot understand why certain things happen, but there is usually a reason—and therefore he cannot transform Kay. Wart, upset, does not understand this logic. Merlyn, meanwhile, has a tussle with his magic as he is repeatedly sent the wrong hat (including a sailor's hat & a top-hat). Wart suddenly asks Merlyn if there is any way the pair could have an adventure without Merlyn doing magic. To which Merlyn jumps up and exclaims that the two must go straight to Hob's patch of barley after breakfast and forget their lessons for the day.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 10

Wart and Kay venture out to the patch of barley and continue walking into the forest. They come across an old, peculiar looking man sitting next to a newly felled tree who doesn't respond to their questions. They continue on to find a seven-foot man asleep with a dog on his head. As the two approach, the man rises, laughing, and introduces himself as Little John. Wart is delighted—a man from Robin Hood's band!

The giant corrects Wart: it is not Robin Hood, but rather Robin Wood. Little John leads them to a giant lime tree, at the bottom of which lies Robin Wood with his head in Marion's lap, singing. Robin is tall, sinewy, sunburned and gnarled from weather. Robin and Marion finish singing a song and greet the boys. Robin asks to see the boys' shooting skills; the two perform well and Robin explains that they need the boys' help to battle Morgan Le Fay.

In this scene, the reader begins to empathize with Kay—his arrogance and superiority simply hides insecurities about Wart and Wart's relationship with Merlyn.



This story—one from the Old Testament—illustrates how Merlyn's magic works. Wart cannot always see it working, or know why it is working, but it will be ultimately revealed. Although Merlyn tells this story to illustrate why Kay does not have any adventures, it holds true for all of Wart's education: most of the lessons Wart learns are not immediately useful, but their importance will become apparent later.



Indeed, the main reason why Wart has special lessons but Kay does not is because Wart will later become King of England and will revolutionize the political world—but this is something neither Wart nor Kay knows yet.



In this adventure, Wart & Kay will meet Robin Wood (his name, we learn, is Robin Wood not Robin Hood but has become confused over time). This interaction seems somewhat out of place because Robin Hood is from a different myth than the Arthurian legend.



Robin Hood and Maid Marion are idealized figures in British history—they engaged in violence and war, but only to help the poor and equalize society. They represent a use of violence that can be justified because it serves a greater good.



Morgan Le Fay is a bad fairy—and Queen of the Fairies—who lives in a castle to the north of the forest. She has taken prisoner Tuck, one of Robin's men, and also Dog Boy from the Castle Sauvage. Wart & Kay, enraged, decide to help Robin and Marion free the prisoners.

This is Wart's first meeting with Morgan Le Fay—an evil fairy (and his own half-sister, as will be revealed) who will reappear throughout the book.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 11

Robin explains to the boys that only a boy or girl can enter the Castle Chariot—Morgan Le Fay's castle—and that the place is guarded by a fierce griffin. Later, after the boys practice with Marion's bows, Robin calls a council and explains: the band will march in four parties, with the boys in Marion's. Morgan Le Fay and her fairies cannot bear iron because their ancestors had been conquered by people with iron swords. So, Wart and Kay will enter the Castle clutching small iron knives to keep them safe. Robin also warns them not to eat in the Castle Chariot.

Morgan Le Fay is one of the Cornwall sisters—three witches who are Gaels. The different ethnicities and their various feuds will feature heavily later in the novel—here the conquering people with "iron swords" refers to the Saxons.



Later, the band begins to march. It is tough going through the forest, but Marion shows them how to walk sideways. Finally, well after twilight falls, Marion's band comes across the smitten oak meeting point where they are met by the whole band. They begin the last stalk and quickly come across the young griffin. Its front end is a huge falcon, but behind the shoulders is a leonine body. The griffin's sleeping head is bowed on its chest and so the band is able to creep past unnoticed.

The griffin is a fierce and magical creature. The magical creature is a fundamental part of any quest because it is something the knight must fight and overcome, but typically also represents some vice the knight must not succumb to.



The stronghold rises from a lake of milk in a greasy, buttery glow (The Oldest Ones of All—the fairies' ancestors—had been gluttons). It smells like a butcher's, a grocer's, a dairy's and a fishmonger's all rolled in one. Wart and Kay are tempted to run away, but instead plod over the filthy drawbridge, leaving the band behind them. They come across the inner chamber where Morgan Le Fay—fat, dowdy, middle-aged—lies. When she sees the iron knives she turns her face away.

This vision of gluttony is a test for the young pair—something sensually repulsive that they must overcome. Unlike later tests depicted in questing, this test is very physical; yet it is appropriate for the boy's ages. They must—without the help of Robin's band, and with only each other to help—rescue the prisoners.



The boys find the prisoners tied to pillars of pork. Kay asks Morgan for her guards to release them, but she only ignores him. Wart and Kay hold hands and begin to approach her, brandishing their iron knives. The Queen begins to writhe and, just before they reach her, dissolves into thin air along with the whole Castle Chariot.

White describes this victory over Morgan Le Fay with very minimal details. However, Kay lays aside his egotism to work together with Wart to free the prisoners—a moment of understated, true chivalry.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 12

Pleased with their success, the outlaws are less careful on their march home. Suddenly, Robin blows his horn and the archers swing around to see the griffin charging. The air is awash with arrows. For Wart, everything happens in slow motion and he struggles to fit an arrow to his bow. He sees the huge griffin's body come towards him and feels a claw in his chest.

In his first experience of war, Wart is unable to cope. He is overwhelmed and freezes. However, this does not happen for Kay and it is he who acts naturally and instinctively under fire.



The band pulls Wart out from under the dead griffin—Kay had killed it with an arrow. Robin sets Wart's broken shoulder bone, after which it is too late to return to Sir Ector's Castle. The next morning, after a sleepless night for Wart, the boys prepare to leave the band. Kay asks if he might keep the head of the griffin as a reward; Wart asks if he might take Wat home—the witless man who had also been held hostage—so that Merlyn can give him his wits back.

Perhaps the discrepancy between how Wart and Kay act in battle is due to Wart's younger age. However, it could also reflect how Wart is not naturally a violent person—his resentment of violence and warfare will continue throughout Arthur's rule where he increasingly seeks ways to solve feuds without Might.



When the small procession arrives back at the Castle Sauvage, the entire household is there to greet them. Sir Ector claims he will mount the griffin's head upon the wall and Wart is rushed off to bed by the nurse. When he wakes later that day, he rushes off to Merlyn and asks him what he had done with Wat. Merlyn responds that he has "psycho-analysed him" and then sent him to live in the kennels with Dog Boy—the two of whom had quickly become firm friends.

Kay's first instinct upon returning home is to show off his prize (the griffin head), while Wart only wants to ensure Wat is cared for. Again, Wart's concern with Wat over chivalric prizes reflects his fundamental value of humanity above personal, chivalric achievements.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 13

Wart is confined to his bedchamber for three days and howls miserably through the keyhole to Merlyn to be turned into something—even an ant! Merlyn, reluctantly, does so. The ant nest Wart finds himself in is entered by a series of tunnels. Above each tunnel, there is a notice that reads: EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY. Wart reads the sign and, not quite understanding it, instinctively dislikes it.

Wart's lesson with the ants is vitally important for his future rule. The ants have no free will, no individual thoughts. They are either forbidden from doing something, or must do it. There is no choice.



Wart slowly becomes aware of a noise in his head. The music is monotonous and the words, like June—moon—Mammy—mammy, do not vary. There is also another voice, one that shouts orders like "All two-day olds will be moved to the West Aisle." The voice is impersonal, almost as though it were dead.

The voice in his head acts as a dictatorial influence, telling Wart what he should both do and feel. This voice represents the opposite mode of rule from that practiced by England's current ruler—King Uther—whose control is felt in no part of the realm.



As he explores, Wart comes across two dead ants. Soon, a live ant arrives carrying a third corpse. Wart watches as the ant attempts, unintelligently, to arrange the bodies. He wants to ask things like "Are you a slave?" but realizes ant language does not have the words: all he can say is Done or Not Done. After the ant finishes arranging, he asks Wart what he is doing. Wart responds that he is not doing anything.

The simplicity of the ant language and their unquestioning adherence to rules illustrates a form of subjection totally alien and disgusting to Wart. This is one example of rule that makes all conform to an ideology, but conformation is determined by the limitations of expression.



The live ant and the voice quickly decide Wart has fallen on his head and can't remember his role, and so assign him to 'mash squad.' Wart quickly joins the mash squad. He begins to fill himself with the sweet mash, at first delicious to him, and when he's full he moves to the inner fortress to deposit it. As they work, the mash squad talk: about how lovely their leader and nest are, how lucky they are, and so on. The remarks are always the same.

One outcome of the ant's conformity is how mundane their existence is—there is no freedom to question, but also no freedom to be original or progressive. What someone does is determined for them.



Later that afternoon, an ant from another nest wanders over the bridge to be met by a native ant and quickly killed. The broadcasts change: the voice explains that they are going to war for a variety of inconsistent reasons such as: we are numerous and starving, therefore we have a right to the others' mash; the others are more numerous and are therefore threatening, we are a mighty race and they are puny etc.

The reasons for the ant war are so inconsistent they are almost satirical. These blatantly inconsistent attempts by the voice to justify the war simply exposes how unjustified the war is—ultimately, it is simply because there is an other and the ants fear the other.



After this, religious services begin. It is peculiar to Wart that the ants are unmoved by these broadcasts, but simply accept them as rituals. When the time for war comes, Wart is sickened by the monotonous voices of wickedness in his head. Finally, Wart finds himself back in his bed.

Wart is sickened by the ant warfare, without truly understanding why. The ant warfare—waged just for the sake of it—exposes Wart to the inconsistencies and immorality of warfare in chivalric England that Wart, at this point, still unquestioningly accepts.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 14

Everybody in the Castle Sauvage is preparing for Winter. Sir Ector, as The Overlord, oversees all the activities of his household. One morning he receives a letter from King Uther Pendragon, saying that Sir Ector is to receive the King's huntsman to hunt boars in the Forest Sauvage. Although the forest does belong to the King, Sir Ector still considers this command to be tyrannous.

The letter Sir Ector receives is only a minor occurrence but depicts the tyranny of King Uther's rule, under which every person is subject to his unquestionable authority, simply because he is king.



In the end, Sir Ector resolves to do the King's bidding and retires to his solar, or study, where he writes a submissive response to King Uther saying he will be delighted to host the King's Huntsman.

Sir Ector's passing attempt to counter tyranny is quickly resolved. His actions illustrate the superficiality of any current attempts to curve the king's power.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 15

It is Christmas Night in the Castle Sauvage, the night before the Boxing Day Meet, and the whole village has come to dinner in the hall. There is dancing and eating, and even King Pellinore and William Twyti (the King's Huntsman) sing. Finally, Sir Ector winds up the whole proceedings with a speech and the whole congregation sings homage to King Uther Pendragon. After the last notes die away, the Castle Sauvage sleeps peacefully in the silence of the holy snow.

This chapter is a highly detailed description of the festivities at the Castle Sauvage. Sir Ector, despite his stupidity and bumbling nature, is a benevolent ruler although he sees no problems with the serf system in place.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 16

The next morning, the whole hunt gathers outside the castle in the frosty dawn. Master Twyti is a shriveled looking man—he is not particularly fond of his job. The whole castle shivers with excitement; boar-hunting is dangerous and unpredictable. Wart and King Pellinore can barely eat, while Sir Ector and Sir Grummore eat with gusto—Kay misses breakfast all together.

The entire household and all the villagers turn out for the event—even Robin Hood. Finally, they reach the boar's lair. The hounds are uncoupled and silence descends. After a few minutes, a black boar suddenly appears at the edge of the clearing and charges Sir Grummore. The boar escapes the clearing and everyone runs after it. Wart sticks to the Huntsman like a burr—although everyone else quickly disappears into the foliage behind. Suddenly, a horn is blown and they come across the boar. The huntsman advances with a spear before him and the boar charges. With the boar on him and hounds surrounding him, Master Twyti disappears; Robin quickly draws his dagger and begins to thrust into the boar's side. Before long, the boar collapses to the ground.

Master Twyti crawls free of the boar, clutching one of the dogs, Beaumont, who has been killed. The Huntsman begins to cry. The foot-people soon gather and a small barrel of wine is provided. However, suddenly King Pellinore appears frantically, exclaiming the most horrible thing has happened. The gathering moves off after him and comes across King Pellinore crying and clutching the head of the **questing beast** in his lap.

King Pellinore says that he had not meant to leave the questing beast alone, and he angrily blames Sir Grummore's feather bed for the beast's illness. The band gathers the questing beast up and transports it back to the castle.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 17

It is now early Spring. The Questing Beast—after being nourished with hot milk—had bounded off into the snow weeks ago, to be followed two hours later by King Pellinore. Merlyn, in his tower with Wart, asks him what he would like to be. Wart wants to be a bird. Merlyn, Archimedes and Wart proceed to argue over which is the best bird—Archimedes prefers the pigeon because she is a kind of Quaker, dutiful and wise; while Merlyn prefers both the chaffinch and the kestrel—the kestrel because they are the origin of bird language.

Boar hunting is one of the peculiar sports of medieval England depicted in the book. It is a sport, yet unnecessarily cruel. Indeed, during Arthur's reign, there is no mention of boar hunting being practiced at all.



The boar's death is exciting and dramatic for Wart. Yet, it is also depicted as cruel and unfair—the boar is killed by Robin Hood when its back is turned. This type of death will re-occur later in the novel—a murder committed cowardly.



The Questing Beast has been absent from the novel ever since Pellinore was convinced by Sir Grummore to stay with him by the comfort of a feather bed.



Pellinore's commitment to his quest is somewhat farcical—he was willing to give it up over a feather bed. But in the questing beast's illness it is made symbolically clear that a quest can only have meaning or continue to exist if the questor is devoted to it. Inattention will kill the quest.



White describes, only briefly, the re-pursuit of the Questing Beast by King Pellinore; but, his description emphasizes the comedy of the scene—with Pellinore allowing the Beast a two-hour head-start and the Beast being careful not to leave tracks. Archimedes' preference for the staunchly non-violent "Quaker" pigeon is interesting in violent Medieval England, while Merlyn's preference for the bird that originated bird language may be related to his interest in learning and magic.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 18

Wart is woken later by Archimedes, who gives him a mouse to eat. Wart, finds himself with wings and flies uneasily to join Archimedes at the window sill, but instead plummets straight through the window. Having righted himself, Wart and Archimedes fly leisurely over the land. While they fly and then land on a branch, Archimedes gives Wart a lecture about flight in birds while he absentmindedly spies for his dinner.

The place Archimedes takes Wart to is absolutely flat and only one element lives there: the wind. The wind here is a power. Standing facing it, Wart feels that he is uncreated and that he is living in nothing but chaos. Away to the east is an unbroken wall of sound—the huge, remorseless sea.

When daylight comes, Wart finds himself standing among a crowd of beautiful, white geese. When the goose next to him takes-off, he follows suit and flies with her pack. They land in a coarse field and take it in turns to eat and stand guard. The young female goose next to Wart pecks him—he has been on sentry twice as long as he should have. Wart confesses to her this was his first day as a goose. He asks if they are at war, because of the sentries. She is confused, of course they do not fight against each other and rarely against other birds! But, Wart exclaims, wouldn't it be fun to go to battle? The goose, disgusted, turns away. Wart tries to apologize; the goose (whose name is Lyo-lyok) explains that to kill another goose would be unnatural, it would be murder!

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 19

Days and nights passed. Wart becomes fond of Lyo-lyok; she teaches him about the geese—how they have no kings, they do not own things in common, but nor can they own any territorial property. One day, the geese take flight again, returning to their starting place after the winter. Suddenly, Wart is back in his bed; Kay is asking exasperatedly why he was honking like a goose in his sleep.

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 20

Six years pass. The boys continue their lessons and Wart is changed into many different animals. Kay becomes more difficult; he loses his temper easily, challenges everyone to fights, and becomes very sarcastic. Wart continues to be stupidly fond of Kay. It is nearly time for Kay's initiation into knighthood and the boys drift further apart—Kay does not care to associate with Wart anymore, who is to be his squire.

With each adventure as an animal, Wart not only learns about leadership and right and wrong, but also learns how to use his body in new and different ways. These experiences will help him later when he tries to pull the sword from the stone.



This long lyrical passage about the destructive nature of wind on the self is in a way representative of Arthur's entire endeavor. The chaos he attempts to control will break his individuality and he will become only the King—a person to enact the idea but not to live his own life.



Lyo-Lyok's reaction to Wart's question is somewhat jarring, even for the reader. It is so ingrained in us that humans fight other humans, that the idea of never fighting one's kind is unbelievable. Yet, although it is jarring, it is also correct—we each recognize how unnatural warfare is against other humans, but it is still done and accepted.



The governance of the geese is somewhat peculiar—almost socialist. They have no ruler, no property rights and also no conflict. It seems ideal, yet somewhat impossible to maintain.



Kay's evolution into a knight continues to accentuate his difference from Wart. Yet, Wart, however, seems too innocent and unquestioning. He blindly follows Kay despite Kay's arrogance and un-chivalric behavior.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 21

The day for the ceremony draws near and Wart becomes sulky. Merlyn decides the best thing for Wart is to learn something and decides he should meet his friend badger. Merlyn also tells Wart that once Kay is knighted and Wart his squire, Merlyn will have to leave him.

Wart finds himself at the entrance to an enormous molehill. Being obstinate, Wart decides to enjoy his last night of freedom and trundles away from the molehill. He soon comes across a frightened hedgehog. "Hedge-pig," Wart growls, "I am going to munch you up." The hedgehog pleads and begins to sing; he sings through the same three songs twice before Wart caves in and promises he will not eat him if only the hedgehog stops singing. Wart discovers the hedgehog is the very one Merlyn had had as a pet when it was younger; he promises not to hurt him. With this, the hedgehog goes back to sleep and Wart sets off to find the badger.

Wart finds Badger at the entrance to his den. The Badger explains he is writing a treatise on why Man became master of the animals. Badger begins to read from his manuscript. He describes the moment of the earth's conception when all animals were made—each embryo was allowed to choose a specific attribute from God. The last embryo—Man—asked simply to stay the same and, because of this, God enslaved all the other animals to man's dominion.

Badger and Wart discuss Man's rule, or tyranny, over the other animals. Badger states that man is the only animal to wage war on its own kind—apart from a few exceptions. Wart says he would very much like to go to war; Badger does not respond, but simply asks "Which did you like best, the ants or the wild geese?"

BOOK 1, CHAPTER 22

King Pellinore arrives for the knighting ceremony with news from London: King Uther Pendragon has died. The Nurse exclaims tearfully that King Uther has neither heir nor next of kin. But, King Pellinore tells about how a sword in a stone has appeared in a churchyard. Pellinore, getting excited, says that the sword has written on it: "Whoso Pulleth Out This Sword of this Stone and Anvil, is Rightwise King Born of All England."

Merlyn's announcement that he will be leaving Wart seems somewhat out of the blue; it also seems as if his education of Wart has been for nothing—if he will only go on to be a squire.



For the first time, Wart is the aggressor. He uses his power and Might over the hedgehog to frighten him. Wart learns what it feels like to be the one who can wield power and violence, but quickly gives it up.



Badger's treatise is an adaption of the Genesis story. But his treatise also speaks to man's tyrannous rule over other species. Man uses his Might to rule other animals, just as he uses it to rule his own kind.



Once more, as with the geese, Wart learns that mankind is unnatural to kill its own. Yet still Wart does not understand how violent warfare is—he still idealizes and romanticizes the chivalric nature of warfare.



The appearance of the sword is another magical event in the novel. It also seems somewhat backward that a country's new ruler will be decided by something so arbitrary—yet this is indicative of the absence of authority that governs England, and the fact that England is ruled by force (i.e. "by the sword").



The sword, Pellinore continues, has not yet been pulled out although all the Lords of London have been trying. The Court has arranged a tournament for New Year's Day to find the next King of England. Kay quickly demands that they go to London and enter this tournament—it will be Kay's first as a Knight—and Sir Ector agrees.

A tournament in this era typically involved a variety of knightly sporting events such as jousting, sword-fighting, fist-fighting, and others.



At this moment, Wart comes in with Merlyn to hear they will be travelling to London and Wart will act as Kay's squire in the tournament. Wart, however, is sad: Merlyn has come to say goodbye.

Although this event will be the making of Arthur and a fated event, Wart barely registers it, saddened only by Merlyn's departure.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 23

The Knighting takes place and very soon they are setting off for London. On the first day of the tournament, Kay is jittery. He is pale and unable to eat. When they arrive at the huge arena the boys are shocked—it is as big as a football pitch. Kay gasps suddenly—he has left his sword at the inn! Kay demands that "his squire" fetch his sword; Wart looks as if he is going to strike Kay but instead humbly agrees.

Kay is as belligerent towards Wart as was expected. He treats the boy that was his play mate as his inferior simply because of a ceremony—and more so, the ceremony has given him the right to treat Wart as such.



When Wart arrives at the inn, it is closed—everyone had gone to watch the tournament. Wart does not know what to do, where can he possibly find a sword? He canters along the street and comes upon a churchyard. In the middle of the square is a sword stuck into a stone.

What is key is that when Pellinore was explaining the sword in the stone, Wart was not in the room and so has no knowledge of what this sword means.



Wart strides over to the sword and grasps it. He feels extraordinary—as though he can see everything clearly for the first time. He pulls hard and suddenly all his friends (badger, hawk, pike) are reminding him how to use his body. Wart walks up to the great sword, places his right hand on it and pulls it out easily.

All of Merlyn's teaching, it seems, culminates in this very moment—a moment Merlyn has already foreseen. It is as though Wart channels all of the animals he has befriended to use and inhuman force and pull the sword from the stone.



Wart arrives back to the tournament and gives Kay the sword. Kay exclaims that this is not his sword. Wart says he has taken it from a stone in a churchyard. Kay is amazed and beckons Sir Ector over. He tells his father that he is holding the sword from the stone. Sir Ector takes Kay and Wart back to the churchyard; he then asks Kay if he had taken it from the stone. Kay pauses, looks at Wart and then says, "I am a liar. Wart pulled it out." Sir Ector kneels before Wart and Kay kneels too. Wart begins to cry.

Kay has a choice—he encounters a mini-quest of his own. He must decide whether he will lie and be crowned King (Wart adores him so much, he would not dispute this) or tell the truth. He ultimately passes the test and is truthful.



BOOK 1, CHAPTER 24

The coronation is a splendid ceremony. It feels more like a birthday to Wart because of all the presents he receives. There had been some revolts at first, from the Barons and the Gaels, but most soon settled down. The best present Wart receives, however, is a dunce's cap from Sir Ector. When Wart lights it at the top end, as you are supposed to, Merlyn appears standing before him.

Merlyn tells Wart that his father had been King Uther Pendragon. Merlyn, disguised as a beggar, had delivered Wart as a baby to Sir Ector's Castle—but he had been unable to tell Wart until now. Merlyn tells Wart how he already knows the joys and sorrows before him, how no-one will ever address him as Wart again and that from here on he will be known only as King Arthur.

White glosses over the coronation and how certain revolts are quelled. His writing mimics the way in which Wart experiences this period of time—strange, confusing, and incoherent.



It now comes out that Wart is the rightful heir to the throne and that he was disguised as a lowly squire his whole life. Once more, Merlyn had known and seen all this and knows much more of what will happen to Wart as King Arthur. We are left knowing that Arthur is fated and that his life is already set.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 1

At the top of a round tower is a draughty and uncomfortable room. The four children who live in it are lying close together and telling a story. They can hear their mother below, stoking the fire; they adore her dumbly, but are also afraid of her. The eldest, the red-haired Gawaine, is telling the story. They range from ten years to fourteen years old, Gareth is the youngest, then Gaheris and next oldest to Gawaine is Agravaire—the bully of the family.

Gawaine is telling the story of their grandmother, Igraine the Countess of Cornwall, with whom King Uther Pendragon fell in love. The King tried to seduce the Countess although she was married and so the pair fled. The Earl was killed and Igraine, although she already had three daughters (their mother and their Aunts Elaine and Morgan), was forced to marry the king. Gareth is saddened by the unfairness of this rape—he is a generous boy who hates the idea of strength against weakness. Gawaine feels only anger, while Agravaire is moved because of the fate of his mother.

In the room below, the Queen stands before a steaming cauldron and a mirror, holding a black cat. She is trying a well-known spell to amuse herself while the men are away—it is a spell to become invisible. She is not a serious witch, like her sister Morgan, and so although she drops the cat in the boiling water, the spell does not work.

The four boys, known otherwise as the Orkney clan, are Gaelic and thus sons of King Lot who is rebelling against Arthur. Their lives are cruel and harsh—their castle is cold and dank, and their mother similarly cold and uncaring. Although none of them know it, they are nephews of King Arthur's and will become his knights.



The story Gawaine tells illustrates the cruelty of Arthur's father, King Uther, but also the dark tyranny of his reign and any reign founded solely on might. Moreover, it lays the foundation for the feud that continues throughout the novel between the Cornwall family and Arthur's rule.



The Queen is petty and selfish. She cares very little for her children or her husband, but neither does she have the discipline to be dedicated to her witchcraft—as her sister is. But for some reason she has made her children love her with a fury almost manic, as if by neglecting them she has made them need her more.



Meanwhile, upstairs, Gawaine finishes the story—stating this is the reason why Cornwall must forever more be against the King of England, and why their father, King Lot of Orkney, has gone away to fight King Arthur.

This is yet another iteration of the feud the Cornwall boys will never truly be able to lay to rest.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 2

The King of England stands with his tutor on the battlements of the Castle Camelot. It is dusk and very peaceful. Far down below them, men plough farmland and fish in the streams. "It was a splendid battle," Arthur comments. Merlyn looks only skeptical and says that they will all come again, the Kings of Orkney, Garloth, Gore, Scotland, The Hundred Knights and The Tower, and next time stronger.

Arthur still has not learned to see the cruelty of warfare. He is very young and his experience of the battle that day was of something romantic and chivalrous.



Arthur is unfazed by this prospect. Merlyn, Arthur notices, is upset and asks what he has done. Merlyn says merely that Arthur is stupid. "It was clever of you," Merlyn says, "to win the battle...How many of your kerns [foot soldiers] were killed?" Arthur does not know and begins to shift uncomfortably. It was 700 kerns, Merlyn informs him, and not a single knight was hurt.

Merlyn must still teach Arthur about the injustice of battle. He describes how the foot soldiers are mistreated, and how their deaths are to the knights simply numbers rather than human lives. In medieval warfare, knights are barely killed—it is the kerns who fight and die, who determine who wins and loses, and yet who are ignored.



Merlyn gives Arthur some advice about battles: Arthur should not say a battle was lovely, he needs to think and act like himself, not like his ancestors. "What is all this chivalry, anyway?" Merlyn asks. It is only being rich enough to have a castle and suit of armor, "Might is Right, that's the motto." Arthur is pensive; he had only been thinking of himself earlier, but sees now that Merlyn is right. They decide to think on what Arthur should do about it.

Arthur realizes he had been overlooking the kerns. Merlyn questions the very foundations of chivalry: how being chivalrous is only something hierarchy and money buys you rather than something you have to earn and everyone has the right to earn.



Two men far below are walking back to the castle. Arthur wonders what would happen if he dropped a stone on one of their heads. Merlyn answers that it would kill the man it hit, "You are the King...Nobody can say anything to you if you try." Arthur pretends to be curious and seems to be about to drop the stone. Without moving his body, he knocks Merlyn's hat off his head with the stone.

Because of the laws in place, the King can kill whoever he wishes and would never have to answer for it. This incidence illustrates the power the King has and how arbitrary it is that a King can decide the value of human life. Being King is not much different than being the voice that compels the ants.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 3

Kay, Arthur and Merlyn are riding back from hunting. Kay asks Merlyn about Queen Morgause and what the Gaelic revolt is about. Merlyn replies that wars are never fought for one reason, although one reason is the feud between the Gaelic and the Gall (Arthur's monarchy). Arthur asks Merlyn to explain the history to him—seeing as though they are going to fight a war with the Gaelic Confederation.

Merlyn is still trying to teach Arthur about war and its justifications—how there might be a public reason for war, but a thousand private ones including desire for individual power. In a way he is warning Arthur not to trust simple justifications, but to try to understand the complex mechanisms behind peoples' actions.



Merlyn begins: three thousand years ago, the country belonged to a Gaelic race; they were then conquered by the Saxons; who, were then conquered by the Normans—Arthur's father. But, Merlyn continues, this is not the reason the war is going to happen; there is going to be a war because of Queen Morgause and because King Uther killed her father, the Earl of Cornwall. Arthur considers—he says that Queen Morgause is justified because of a personal reason and the Gaels are justified because of racial feud.

The story of the Gaelic feud illustrates a history of repression—but also a history so long distant it seems crazy that it still motivates people to go to war. Arthur however, at this stage, accepts these justifications. He does not see yet that it is not so different from what he experienced when he was an ant.



Merlyn ponders and says that if we think like that, there will never be an end to war because someone will always have a feud to finish—people need to accept the status quo. Besides, at least the Norman conquest united Britain, while the Gaels want to divide it once more. That, Merlyn argues, is why their reason is not a good one.

Merlyn's argument is that if you allow them to, people will always find justifications for violence. History is a history of warfare and feuds, but this history has to stop somewhere in order for the fighting to stop. This is something Arthur will try and achieve later in his life.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 4

Merlyn explains how, when he was young, there was a general idea that it was wrong to fight in wars. There is only one really good reason for fighting: if the other side starts it. There is no excuse, Merlyn emphasizes, for starting a war.

Merlyn's peculiar experience of time allows the reader to compare medieval interpretations of war with our own contemporary ones. This comparison will arise again and again.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 5

Queen Morgause's four children are visiting Mother Morlan—an old, lady currently housing one of the Irish Saints. The Saint is a relapsed saint, busy saving Mother Morlan's soul. The children are coming to hear a story from Mother Morlan or Sir Toirdealbhach (the saint). They argue over which story they want to hear—although they settle on a fighting story from Sir Toirdealbhach.

Just as Arthur grew up under the tutelage of Merlyn, the Orkney clan grow up under the tutelage of Sir Toirdealbhach. But, unlike Merlyn, this saint is somewhat twisted and barbaric, and loves warfare.



Later, in the street, the children come across two moth-eaten donkeys. The boys commandeer them at once and ride them harshly. They had the idea to hurt the donkeys—no one had told them it was cruel to hurt animals. But, when they come to the ocean, they see a magic barge on the water. Inside of the barge are three seasick knights—King Pellinore bursts into tears after being reprimanded by Sir Grummore. Upon landing, the knights hop out—the third of which is a black knight called Sir Palomides.

The incidence with the donkeys illustrates how the boys' upbringing has perverted their sense of right and wrong. They do not understand that they should not hurt animals, or other people. This is something Arthur will attempt to teach them at Court later.



The boys gather around the knights with their mouths open. They are Knights of King Arthur against whom the Gaels are revolting. Why had they come, the Gaels wonder. The Knights draw closer together—they do not know that King Arthur is at war with the Gaels.

As always, King Pellinore and Sir Grummore are comedic, clueless knights—they do not even know Arthur is at war.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 6

King Arthur's court is in tumult—no one can decide how to fight the second campaign against King Lot's slowly moving army. Merlyn presents himself in Court because Arthur has summoned a council of Sir Kay, Sir Ector and Merlyn. Arthur begins to talk about chivalry, and about Might .v. Right.

Arthur continues: why does Merlyn help him to fight battles if they are bad things? The only reason Arthur can think of is so that, by winning these battles, he might stop all battles afterwards. Arthur explains, Merlyn wants him to put things right, so that Might is no longer Right. But, what Arthur has also been thinking, is that perhaps one could harness Might for Right. You can't cut out Might all together, but you could perhaps re-direct it for good.

If, Arthur goes on, he can win this battle, he will institute a new order of chivalry. He will make it a great honor to be in this new Order, and he shall make the oath of the Order that Might is only to be used for Right.

After Arthur has finished speaking, Merlyn stands up and stretches his hands to the ceiling.

Although Camelot is preparing for battle, Arthur has his sights set on how to rule after battle. His education under Merlyn is beginning to solidify as he begins to understand his responsibility to the realm.



This is the beginning of Arthur's great idea: that violence and power will henceforth only be used to uphold justice. Might will not make things right—it won't be the case that you can simply do whatever you are strong enough to do. Might will be used to support what is right, and what is right will be defined independently of physical or material strength.



This new Order of chivalry is to replace the old order of chivalry solely based off hierarchy and money.



Merlyn acts like this because his task has finally been accomplished and Arthur has begun to reform political and ideological systems.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 7

This is how the three knights had arrived at Orkney: King Pellinore had been chasing the questing beast, who had dived into the ocean. He had hailed a passing ship—upon which Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides had happened to be. They arrived at Flanders and were taken in by the Court, where King Pellinore had promptly fallen in love with the Queen of Flander's daughter—a stout, middle-aged woman. However, when a magic barge appeared, the three knights investigated it and were rushed away from the coast of Flanders all the way to Orkney. King Pellinore is now deeply lovesick.

However, Queen Morgause has set her cap at the visitors. The four boys had seen Morgause and the three knights 'hunting a unicorn,' although the hunt was apparently unsuccessful. Gareth proposes that they hunt a unicorn because it would make their mammy notice them again.

King Pellinore's game with the Questing Beast led him to arguably his true goal—to meet the Queen of Flanders's daughter. However, once more the three knights are highly comedic as the only reason they enter the mysterious barge is because, as knights, they must investigate anything mysterious. This gesture illustrates the absurdity of knightly expectations and deflates idealized chivalry.



Morgause is not simply a terrible mother, but perpetually sexually unfaithful and mistreats her children. Indeed, the boys will do anything to get her attention—even hunt and kill something wholly pure, like a unicorn.



The boys need a virgin for bait, and so they decide to take the kitchen maid Meg. Gawaine marches Meg firmly by the hair and secures her to a tree, although she is crying and begs them not to. They are armed with spears from the armory and hide in a bush to await the unicorn. Meg, meanwhile, is bawling and Gareth tries to comfort her. The four decide not to kill the unicorn when it comes, but to capture it and bring it home.

When the unicorn arrives, it holds them all spellbound with its beauty. It is pure white, with sad, tragic eyes. The unicorn lays its head in Meg's lap. Suddenly, Agravaine is running towards the unicorn with his spear raised, and begins to jab it fiercely. Blood spurts violently. At last, the creature lies still. The others stand around frozen. "What have you done?" Gareth cries.

They do not know what to do, but suddenly the wonder of their achievement dawns over them all. They decide they must take its head home to show their mother. Meg, meanwhile, quickly runs off sobbing, closely followed by Gareth. The three remaining boys begin to hack and cut, but do not know what they are doing. They begin to cry and sweat. The head is too heavy for them to lift themselves and so they take it in turns to drag it. When they get to the castle, they prop the mangled head on a bench outside their mother's door. However, on walking past it, Queen Morgause is so distracted by Sir Grummore that she sees neither the head, nor her children.

The way in which the boys decide to hunt for a unicorn is described as something darkly comedic—they do not understand how one goes about it and so everything appears mismanaged and cruel.



Agravaine's instinctive reaction to the unicorn's beauty reveals something deeply perverse in his nature—almost as though his feelings of admiration are too much for him to bear. This intensity of feeling will carry through to his later treatment of his mother and Sir Lancelot.



The boys' treatment of the unicorn is dark, disgusting and deeply tragic. They act cruelly, but it is as if they know no other way to treat other creatures or people. Further, ultimately their effort—which destroyed a beautiful and innocent creature—has no effect as Morgause does not even notice the unicorn's head. Killing and the destruction of the innocent does not fill the holes caused by cruelty.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 8

The plain of Bedegraine, where the battle is to take place, is awash with tents. King Arthur barely leaves his own pavilion, and talks instead to Sir Kay, Sir Ector and Merlyn about his vision for the Order. Arthur decides the knights must sit at a **round table**, to prevent hierarchy, and that he will call them the Knights of the Round Table.

The most important thing, Arthur says, is to catch the knights young before they are impressed by the old chivalry—for instance, the young child Lancelot. Merlyn then tells Arthur that King Leodegrance has a round table that will do and, seeing as Arthur is going to marry his daughter (which Arthur did not yet know), he could ask for it as a wedding present.

Arthur perfects his vision for his Order. The Round Table is symbolic throughout the novel for Arthur's vision for a system of justice and equality that refuses to accept an idea of superiority of one person over another.



Arthur learns from Merlyn that he will one day marry Queen Guenever—Merlyn tells Arthur much of what to expect from his life; although Arthur tries to forget most of it so that he can live without fated knowledge.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 9

To help King Pellinore get over his lovesickness, Sir Palomides and Sir Grummore decided to dress as the questing beast and allow King Pellinore to quest for them. For a week, King Pellinore barely sees his friends as they stitch a costume.

The behavior of the knights becomes even more satiric and comedic as they stitch a costume to pretend they are the questing beast.



The Queen, meanwhile, realizes it is useless to try and seduce the knights. So when, one morning, Gareth nervously comes to her with white heather, she covers him in kisses. Gareth runs off excitedly through the castle to tell his brothers. He finds them arguing about their mother. Suddenly, Gawaine has his hands around Agravaine's throat and beats his head against the floor.

Soon, the knights finish the questing beast costume. They tell Pellinore that they have spotted a beast near the cliff earlier. Pellinore is confused and unexcited; he is tired of forever chasing the beast alone. But, he realizes, it has been eighteen years since last he chased it and so finally agrees.

Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides button themselves into the costume. Meanwhile, King Pellinore stands under the dripping cliff in full armor, thinking about the Queen of Flanders' daughter, about the last time he had seen her and the letters he has written to her. Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides bicker in the tight costume; suddenly, Sir Palomides feels something cold and slippery, and the two begin to run. King Pellinore, bored, decides to go to bed and begins to climb the cliff where he comes across the counterfeit beast arguing with its stomach. At the base of the cliff, the **Questing Beast** herself waits in the moonlight.

BOOK 2, CHAPTER 10

In Bedegraine, it is the night before the battle. Merlyn is concerned that he has forgotten to tell Arthur something—they have spoken about the battle, about Guenever and Lancelot, about Arthur's sword Excalibur and about his father. Instead of what he can't remember, Merlyn tells Arthur a fable: a man was walking in Damascus when he came face to face with Death. He was frightened and so rode all night to Aleppo. The next day, Death taps him on the shoulder; the man is surprised and Death explains that the day before in Damascus, Death had been surprised because he had been told to meet the man in Aleppo.

Arthur reflects on this and realizes that destiny is something you cannot elude. Merlyn decides to tell Arthur something else—that when he is dead, his tomb will say: *Hic jacet Arthurus Rex quondam Rexque futurus*. This translates as: *The Once and Future King*. The King is silent; he wonders if they will remember his table; he wonders what sort of people the people of the future will be.

The four brothers are incredibly loyal to one another but treat each other cruelly. Their bond is a vicious, harsh connection that seems to circle endlessly around their mother and her neglect, which has made them both come together as they are all they have, but also compete for her notice.



It is odd that after so many years of dedication to questing, Pellinore has lost his excitement for it. The quest was perhaps simply a means, something to keep him amused until he met the Queen of Flanders' daughter.



This scene is truly comedic—the knights are clowns, dressing up in a ridiculous costume. Meanwhile, the entire false quest distracts Pellinore from the actual Questing Beast.



The fable Merlyn tells Arthur illustrates the novel's attitude towards fate and destiny. Arthur is a fated figure. Arthur, just as the man in the story does, seeks to avoid this fate, but ultimately these efforts only lead him to that same fate. Interestingly, Merlyn's telling of this fable of fate is itself a part of Arthur's fate, as the thing that Merlyn has forgotten to tell Arthur—his mother's name—would later alert Arthur to the fact that Morgause was his half-sister, which may have stopped her from being able to seduce him, and therefore meant that Mordred would never have been born.



This is the first mention of the idea of Arthur as a "future" king. This title may suggest that Arthur will arise again to rule longer after he dies. But the notion of the future king may also refer to the fact that Arthur is ahead of his time, a political innovator whose attempts to reform justice will fail but will improve the state of humanity in its attempt.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 11

After breakfast, Pellinore walks out along the shore where he comes across Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides dressed in their costume. They are pointing aggressively to the base of the cliff. It turns out that the questing beast, thinking the two knights are a beast, has fallen in love with them. She is at the base of the cliff, arching her back provocatively and fluttering her eyelashes. The two knights want Pellinore to kill her once and for all so that they can escape, which he refuses to do.

They are able to make it back to the Castle and draw the drawbridge in time. The whole party mounts the battlements to look for Pellinore (who they believe must have been eaten). After an hour or so, two figures appear at the horizon—it is King Pellinore with his arm around a middle-aged woman! It turns out to be the Queen of Flander's daughter who had found them with the help of the Questing Beast. The castle lowers the drawbridge for Pellinore who tries to hold the **Questing Beast** back while the lady enters; however the Questing Beast rushed in quickly, knocking Pellinore flat. Later that night, the Gaels throw a bachelor party for Pellinore and celebrate his nuptials.

White's description of the questing beast is highly comedic and satiric—the questing beast as symbolic for the notion of the quest itself is treated as something light-hearted and ridiculous. This treatment deflates all romanticized notions of the quest. Now the questing beast is chasing the knights, rather than the other way around.



This comedic story is an interlude to the more sinister action elsewhere in the kingdom. Both its humor and its happy ending juxtapose the tragedy of the other action in the novel.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 12

The traditional way of fighting battles, and the way in which King Lot and the Gaelic Confederation were going to fight, is that the kerns (the serfs or foot soldiers) fight on the outer circle, while the nobles fight in the inner circle. The nobles do not really fight one another, but observe a form of ritual while the kerns shed blood and make the numbers to win or lose. But King Arthur has decided not to fight in the traditional manner; he has come to learn the value of each kern's life and orders his knights to truly fight.

Arthur begins the battle by not observing the traditional hour for warfare. Instead, he attacks by night. Arthur is wildly outnumbered; torches flare and the cries of battle linger over the ground. His start is rewarded with success.

At around noon, King Lot recognizes he is being dealt a different kind of warfare. Lot's nerve begins to waver; he is wounded in the shoulder. When the sun sets, Arthur calls off the attack although they are close to victory. The exhausted armies sleep. At daybreak, Arthur attacks again. At noon, the allied kings break in a spectacle of shattered lances and debris.

Here, Arthur introduces the practice of total warfare. He demolishes the ritualistic aspects to warfare, instead wanting not to hide the brutal and inhuman act of killing behind something idealized. In writing these scenes, White is also arguing against the practice of propaganda during WWII: propaganda attempted to depict the war as something romantic and courageous, when it was in fact brutal, inhuman and violent.



The notion that there might be a "traditional hour" for warfare is peculiar; both this and Arthur's subversion of the convention draws attention to the ironically inhumane nature of warfare previously—in which the violence was concealed by a veil of chivalry and romanticism.



Arthur's attack on King Lot is perhaps disrespectful as he catches him off guard. But Arthur wishes simply for the battle to be done with so he can begin his rule to end all battles.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 13

A few weeks later, King Pellinore is sitting atop the cliff with his bride-to-be. They are to travel to England the next day to be married. Inside the castle, King Lot—returned from battle—sleeps while Morgause stands silently at the window holding a strip in her hands. She is to go to England with Pellinore, as a token of pardon, and will take her children with her. The strip in her hands is called a spansel, and is a tape of human skin cut from a dead man. If you tie the spansel round the head of a man without him waking, he will fall in love with you.

The four children are awake too. They are kneeling in the Church of the Men, praying that they remain true to their mother, worthy of the feud, and that they never forget the misty land of Orkney.

Morgause is plotting to seduce Arthur—hence the spansel. Throughout the rest of the novel, Arthur will be accused of seducing Morgause by the Orkney clan. The Orkney clan, blinded by their love for their mother, are unable to see or even comprehend the reprehensibility of her actions. Further, Arthur does not know that Morgause is his half-sister, but she does know that seducing him will be a kind of incest.



These three prayers will come to shape much of the action throughout the rest of the novel.



BOOK 2, CHAPTER 14

King Arthur is excited to see his old friends again and quickly arranges a wedding for King Pellinore. No trouble is spared—there are flowers, bells, and feasts. Meanwhile, far away Merlyn jumps up in bed—he suddenly remembers what he had forgotten to tell Arthur: his mother's name! Arthur's mother was Igraine—the very Igraine the Orkney brothers had spoken of who King Uther had captured.

Later that night after the festivities, King Arthur is sitting in the Great Hall alone. It has been a tiring few months, but finally it seems as if there might be peace. He thinks about being married one day to a beautiful woman and falls asleep. He wakes to find a beauty in front of him, wearing a crown. The spansel has worked its magic and Morgause seduces Arthur. Nine months later, Queen Morgause will have a baby boy by her half-brother Arthur called Mordred: Mordred will be King Arthur's downfall. Arthur does not know that he has slept with his half-sister and this is the tragedy of his demise—innocence aids his downfall.

Merlyn, although he knows already what will happen, is even himself caught by fate—he forgets to tell Arthur the one thing that might prevent his downfall, which would stop Morgause from being able to seduce him. This is where White's notion of fate becomes convoluted and thus a satire of itself: surely if Merlyn can see all, he knows that he will forget and could have prevented his forgetfulness.



This is the moment of Arthur's downfall and that which will destroy his Order of Knights. White very consciously informs us that this will be his downfall and by doing so forces the reader to see Arthur as an innocently, tragic figure—simple, yet ensnared by those around him.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 1

The young Lancelot is in the Armory at the Castle Benwick in northern France—his father's castle. He is trying to look at his reflection in a kettle-hat; he thinks there is something wrong with his face, that he is as ugly as a monster. All through his life—even when he is a great Knight—Lancelot will feel like there is a gap at the bottom of his heart of which he is ashamed.

Just as Arthur's tragic flaw is his innocence and belief in the fundamental decency of humanity, Lancelot's is his belief that he himself is fundamentally impure.



Lancelot is fiercely in love with Arthur. When they were embarking for France after Pellinore's wedding, King Arthur had called him over. Arthur had told him that he wanted to create an Order to fight Might, and that he was looking for knights to join. Lancelot had responded that he would very much like to be a part of this order when he was grown.

Ever since then, Lancelot has been spending every day in the Armory, practicing to become a knight for Arthur. He decides that when he is a knight, he will have a melancholic name—he will be the Chevalier Mal Fet (the ill-made knight).

Lancelot will become one of Arthur's greatest knights. And his commitment to Arthur does stem from a selfish desire to be chivalrous (traditional chivalry), but from an idealistic commitment to Arthur's idea of justice.



The Ill-Made Knight will become Lancelot's alter-ego—the self that overcomes him when his fundamental insecurities about his purity rise up.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 2

Lancelot will grow up to be the greatest knight King Arthur had. But, for now, he practices every day in the Armory. He will spend every day for three years in the same room—with a sullen, unspoken dedication. The other boys do not worry about practice, but the ugly one has to prepare himself for Arthur. He supports himself solely on dreams. He wants to be the best knight in the world so that Arthur will love him. He wants, moreover, through his purity and excellence, to one day perform something miraculous—like curing a blind man or some such thing.

One of the more peculiar things about White's Lancelot is his ugliness—White repeatedly describes Lancelot as being incredibly ugly, almost grotesque. Perhaps it is his deformities that give rise to his incredibly complex and denigrating sense of self.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 3

All of the great families that feature in this story have a sort of genius or tutor in the family: Arthur had Merlyn, Gawaine and his brothers had Sir Toirdealbhach, while Lancelot has Gwenbors or Uncle Daps. Uncle Daps is Lancelot's uncle and very well learned in chivalry and armor. He also used to be the best swordsman in France—for this reason primarily Lancelot had become attached to him.

One day in late Summer, Uncle Daps and Lancelot are practicing in the Armory. A page comes in to say there are visitors for Lancelot. Entering his mother's chamber, Lancelot encounters an elderly gentleman with a white beard and a young woman with an olive complexion. Merlyn (the old man) announces to Lancelot that he will be the finest knight Arthur ever has, and that Arthur and Guenever send their love. Lancelot asks if Arthur has chosen all of his knights—Merlyn looks confused and shift. He says Arthur has twenty-one still to chose. With this, Merlyn and his new wife Nimue must depart for their honeymoon and vanish. Lancelot hurries off to find Uncle Dap and announces that he is going to England, but that Uncle Dap must not tell his parents.

Although White compares Uncle Dap to Merlyn, he is in no way comparable—Uncle Daps is neither wise nor eccentric, nor does he seek to challenge Lancelot. He is simply incredibly faithful and resilient.



This encounter between Merlyn and Lancelot is uncomfortable and the only time the two will meet—indeed it is the last time Merlyn appears in the novel. Merlyn is confused about time—not knowing whether Lancelot has yet even met Guenever. Regardless, his visit spurs Lancelot into action and forces him to flee to Camelot. Merlyn is himself ensnared by his own fate, as he knows that Nimue will end up trapping him in a cave for hundreds of years, yet he is so in love with her he cannot stop himself from going with her.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 4

Lancelot is riding towards Camelot with a bitter heart and Uncle Dap at his side. He has been at Camelot training in the Armory for two years now, but is yet to be noticed or knighted. He is jealous of Guenever, who always comes between Arthur's love for him. They come to a clearing in the woods and see an enormous knight in black armor with his tilting helm in position. Without any of the traditional jousting rituals, Lancelot prepares and takes position at the other end of the clearing and the two gallop towards one another. The point of his spear takes the black knight at exactly the right place and knocks him straight off his horse.

The knight does not get angry but simply laughs good-humoredly and looks with admiration at Lancelot. He takes his helmet off—it is King Arthur! Lancelot quickly kneels before him, but Arthur is so impressed with Lancelot's skill that he bids him stand. They ride back to Camelot together, talking all the way.

Arthur knights Lancelot the very next day. He then introduces Lancelot to Guenever—a young woman with startling black hair and deep blue eyes. Lancelot is polite, but cold—he is still jealous of her.

Weeks pass. In the second half of summer, Arthur gives Lancelot a hawk for the season. Lancelot, however, does not have a hawking assistant and so Guenever offers to act as Lancelot's (Arthur had asked her to be kind to Lancelot). One day, while hawking, Guenever becomes confused over the way to wind the rope. Lancelot, angered, lashes out at her violently. Guenever is deeply hurt and Lancelot, looking up, sees the kindness and hurt in her eyes and realizes she is not the deceitful minx he had made her out to be, but a real person.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 5

Uncle Dap and King Arthur begin to notice that Lancelot and Guenever are falling in love. Arthur had been warned of this by Merlyn, but had never truly paid attention to his warnings. Unsure what to do, Arthur decides to take Lancelot with him to the Roman War to get him away from Guenever. The Roman War is a long and arduous conquest that is ultimately successful—Arthur is recognized by Rome as the overlord of England—and the pair return to Camelot after two years, determined not to let Guenever come between their friendship.

This is the only time in the book that White describes Arthur jousting, and even here he is disguised. It is as though Arthur must be distanced from all forms of knightly pursuits and any engagement in violence—and this only becomes more pronounced as Arthur ages. As illustrated here, Lancelot is the better knight and can beat Arthur easily.



Other knights when they are dismounted in jousting typically curse and blaspheme—Arthur's reaction is to laugh. He, unlike other knights, has no egotism nor pride.



It is ironic that Lancelot is at first jealous of Guenever because he thinks she comes between him and Arthur's love—considering the complex relationship that will develop between the three.



The moment in which Guenever and Lancelot fall in love is peculiar—Lancelot begins to fall in love with her because he has hurt her; he witnesses the humanity in her and recognizes the thing about which he is ashamed (his sense of impurity) in her.



Although Arthur had been warned of Lancelot and Guenever's relationship—as well as many other things—by Merlyn, he chooses to ignore it. This choice is fundamental to the tragedy and fate of the characters; by choosing to ignore premonitions, by seeking to ignore fate or refuse to allow it to destroy what he is trying to build, Arthur simply plays into the path destiny has given him.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 6

Lancelot is a peculiar man with a contradictory nature: he likes to hurt people and is cruel; yet he fell in love with Guenever because he had hurt her.

Lancelot is one of the most complex characters in this novel—more so than Arthur.



When Arthur and Lancelot arrive in England, Lancelot quickly realizes Guenever would come between them: he sees her kiss Arthur and feels his entrails in knots. The next day, he asks Arthur if he might have leave from court, to quest and to use his Might for Right. In truth, Lancelot knows he needs to be away from Guenever, but Arthur grants him leave all the same.

White shows that it is inevitable that Lancelot and Guenever will betray Arthur—it is only time until they do. Thus the origin of Lancelot's questing is not purity, but rather to avoid an unavoidable betrayal. His questing—like all quests, the novel suggests—is futile.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 7

These are the first of Lancelot's famous quests. Here are just a few examples of many quests over many months: one day, Lancelot comes across a knight (who is Sir Carados) in armor with another bloodied knight tied up on his horse. Lancelot stops the knight and, realizing the bloodied knight is Sir Gawaine, challenges the knight to a joust for the prisoner. The two joust and Lancelot quickly kills Sir Carados and frees Gawaine.

Over the course of Arthur's reign, many knights undertake many quests—in attempts to use their Might in the name of Right and uphold justice. All the knights Lancelot kills while questing are those from the old era—when darkness and barbarism reigned.



Lancelot continues on; while sleeping, a pageant of four women come across him, the leader of which is Morgan Le Fay. Morgan enchants Lancelot and carries him off to the Castle Chariot where he is imprisoned. Lancelot refuses to become Morgan's lover and so is left tied up. However, the serving girl asks Lancelot whether, if she frees him, he will fight for her father in a tournament. Lancelot agrees; the maid frees him and Lancelot fights and wins the tournament for her father.

While being a mechanism to bring justice to England, there is also a trial component to the questing genre—that each adventure is also a trial to test the spiritual purity of the knight. Hence, in this trial, Lancelot is asked to take one of the witches as mistress, but rejects this offer because he is in love with Guenever.



Next on his travels, Lancelot comes across a damsel riding a white mare; he asks her if there is an adventure to be found. She tells him about a strong and evil knight who has imprisoned sixty-four other knights. Lancelot rides with the woman to this knight's castle, passing along the way sixty-four pairs of armor hung up in a glade. They wait outside the castle gates and eventually an enormous knight comes riding towards them with another knight tied up upon his horse. Lancelot challenges the knight to a joust.

The knight Lancelot will fight is, much like Mr. Pike from Wart's early adventures, an instinctive and perverse killer who, under King Uther's rule, was allowed to commit injustice simply because he had the knightly strength and skill to do so.



This joust is unlike other's Lancelot has attempted: the knight is almost equally matched with Lancelot. The fight goes on, they knock each other to the ground and proceed for hours with swords. Eventually, the knight stops and says that he has been so impressed with Lancelot's skill he will release all the prisoners unless he is one specific knight: Sir Lancelot. (It turns out the evil knight is Sir Turquine, Sir Carados' brother who Lancelot had killed). The pair continue fighting and Lancelot eventually kills him. The sixty-four knights are freed and Lancelot continues on his questing.

Although Lancelot succeeds in killing the knight and freeing the prisoners, this quest for Lancelot is as much about proving his knightly skills as it is about Right and justice—hence he asks the damsel where he can find an "adventure" rather than about curing injustice. Lancelot is part of Arthur's new order but is still unable to do away with all the old ideas of chivalry.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 8

Lancelot has two more quests on his year-long adventure, before returning to court: he is riding along, when he sees an escaped falcon circling overhead. Suddenly, a plump maiden runs towards him, asking him to capture her falcon. Lancelot strips off his armor, climbs the tree and manages to ensnare the falcon. However, below, the woman's husband appears, dressed in full armor, saying that he will kill Lancelot. Lancelot, although naked without armor or weaponry, uses a branch to knock the knight off his horse and then slits his throat with the knight's own sword.

This trial is one that prepares Lancelot for an event later in his life—when he will be attacked by many armed knights and he is only armed with a wooden foot stool. It is purely a physical trial—there are no symbolic components to it.



A while later, Lancelot sees a maiden being pursued madly by a knight on horseback. The woman cries and asks for Lancelot's assistance: the man is her husband and is trying to kill her because she is an adulteress. Despite her unfaithfulness, Lancelot tells the man that he cannot kill her; but, as soon as Lancelot turns away, the man quickly beheads his wife.

This encounter foreshadows the greatest sin Lancelot will commit—adultery and betrayal. The trial symbolizes what Lancelot will do for many years of his life: defend an adulterous wife from the angry hands of other men. Yet the end result of this trial also suggests that Lancelot's other effort will be in vain and lead to violence.



It is tradition at Pentecost in Arthur's court for returning knights to tell the tales of their questing and for all conquered knights to present themselves to Arthur for pardon. However, Lancelot had told all those he conquered to present themselves to Guenever instead.

Lancelot essentially declares his love for Guenever in front of the entire court when he asks those he conquered to ask Guenever rather than Arthur for pardon.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 9

The conquered knights file into the palace, each stopping to kneel at Guenever's feet—not at Arthur's. All of the knights have been conquered by Sir Lancelot—"the courtly, the merciful, the ugly, the invincible." Lancelot is widely known as the best knight in the world and is even more skilled than Tristram. Lancelot himself enters, and a hush falls over the palace.

Tristram is another widely known medieval figure, and his story parallels—and actually predates—that of Lancelot. Tristram was King Mark's best knight but carried out an affair with his wife, Iseult. In calling Lancelot even more skilled than Tristram, the story emphasizes that Lancelot's abilities are superhuman and a thing of legend while also foreshadowing his relationship with Guenever.



King Arthur breaks the silence, warmly greeting Lancelot. Avoiding eye contact with Guenever, Lancelot asks how things are going in the kingdom. Arthur quickly turns somber and admits that things are going poorly with the **Round Table**. He had originally created the Table as a way to combat violence and establish civilization, justice, and morality—but “in the effort to impose a world of peace, he found himself up to the elbows in blood.” The knights have distorted the Table into a matter of “sportsmanship,” competing with one another over things like who can save the most virgins.

King Arthur explains that the Orkney boys are particularly obsessed with seeing their knighthood as a game—Arthur thinks this is because they’re so desperate to win their mother Morgause’s attention and love. Lancelot brushes off King Arthur’s concerns and proudly declares that “The **Round Table** is the best thing that ever happened.” Arthur, who had been holding his head in his hands in defeat, looks up and catches Lancelot and Guenever “looking at each other with the wide pupils of madness.”

Here, King Arthur reveals how he can’t effectively control violence or justice—the Round Table was meant to quell violence (“might”) and establish justice (“right”) in its place, but Arthur’s idealism just couldn’t hold up in the real world.



Lancelot and Guenever’s budding romance is a strong undercurrent in this chapter, and here Arthur witnesses it for himself. Lancelot’s love for Guenever is at odds with his love and respect for Arthur—Lancelot lauds Arthur’s Round Table as “the best thing that ever happened” and is quick to bolster his friend in a time of wavering confidence. Lancelot’s dilemma—wanting to live honorably and respect Arthur while pining after his wife—emphasizes that he is a deeply human character and not the perfect knight people assume him to be.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 10

Uncle Dap examines Lancelot’s helm (helmet), which is badly torn. He declares that while it’s “honourable” to have a torn helm (since it suggests one has just been in combat), it’s “boastful” and “dishonourable to keep it so when there is an opportunity to replace it.” Lancelot simply answers, “yes.” Uncle Dap then asks Lancelot if he’s enjoying his sword, which was fashioned by “Galand, the greatest sword-smith of the Middle Ages.” Again, Lancelot just answers, “yes.” Exasperated, Uncle Dap asks Lancelot if he can say anything besides “yes.”

Uncle Dap’s meditations on “honourable” and “dishonourable” behavior in regards to something as trivial as a helm (a knight’s helmet) shows how chivalry is performative, made up of numerous esoteric and arbitrary rules. The detail about Lancelot’s sword being crafted by “Galand, the greatest sword-smith of the Middle Ages” points to the theme of fate and time, as the story steps out of its medieval setting and looks back on the Middle Ages as a whole, informing readers like a history book of who was the best sword-maker.



Finally, Lancelot reveals what’s been on his mind, as he asks Uncle Dap, “Is Guenever in love with me?” The narrator interjects, noting that while a modern man might just sleep with Guenever despite her marriage to King Arthur—“or run away with his hero’s wife altogether”—Lancelot’s situation is different. Firstly, he’s a Christian, and his religion “directly forbade him to seduce his best friend’s wife.” Furthermore, Lancelot is a firm believer in King Arthur’s concepts of chivalry and civilization—that is, “that there was such a thing as Right.” Lancelot’s whole childhood centered around training to be a knight “and thinking out King Arthur’s theory for himself.”

The narrator’s interjection contains a humorous yet sharp critique of contemporary social norms and what constitutes as permissive behavior in modern times. The narrator implies that modern-day Christians shouldn’t “seduce [their] best friend’s wife” either, as Christianity prohibits such a thing now as much as it did in the Middle Ages. In underscoring Lancelot’s loyalty to his religion—and his commitment to “right” over “might”—White also sets Lancelot apart from his womanizing reputation that abounds elsewhere in the Arthurian canon.



The third roadblock Lancelot faces in his pining for Guenever is “the impediment of his nature.” Although he deeply loves Guenever and King Arthur, Lancelot loathes himself. Everyone always lauds him as the best knight in the world and assumes he must have an elevated self-esteem to match; in actuality, beneath his “grotesque, magnificent shell” is “shame and self-loathing,” which has been stewing within him since he was just a child. It’s impossible to trace back who or what instilled those feelings in him because it’s “so fatally easy to make young children believe that they are horrible.” Uncle Dap interrupts Lancelot’s brooding and tells him that the entire situation “depends very largely on” how Guenever feels.

This passage complicates the notion that knights are perfect, larger-than-life figures who strut around with inflated egos. Lancelot is a complex and human character, and the “shame and self-loathing” he harbors seem inexplicable to anyone on the outside. Even though White largely seeks to satirize chivalry and medieval life, here he paints Lancelot with realistic and sympathetic strokes.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 11

Lancelot stays at the court for several weeks, but it is torturous to be around Guenever. Finally, he decides to venture out on his second quest. He sets out for the haunted castle of Corbin where King Pelles lives. But, on the way to Corbin, Lancelot comes across a village under the castle; all the people are lined along the streets to greet him; Lancelot feels different, as though colors are brighter and sounds clearer. He is told by the villagers there is a damsel locked up in a bath of boiling water—put there by Morgan Le Fay who was jealous of her beauty—and she can only be rescued by a knight. Lancelot enters the tower and comes across a room filled with steam. In the middle is a small, beautiful girl naked in a bath. Lancelot lifts her out of the bath and carries her from the tower. The damsel's name is Elaine and she is the daughter of King Pelles. Lancelot goes to stay with King Pelles and ends up staying for several weeks.

The damsel locked in the tower is a cliché from myth and one that White subverts. In myth, when a knight rescues a damsel, they typically fall in love with one another. However, here, Elaine will fall in love with Lancelot but he does not return that love.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 12

While at the Castle of Corbin, Lancelot is plagued by depression—he does not want to quest or do anything. One evening, particularly depressed, Lancelot gets very drunk with the castle's butler who plies Lancelot with more and more alcohol. Suddenly, the butler announces a message has arrived for Lancelot: it says that Guenever is at a castle five miles away and wants to see him.

Lancelot is depressed because he knows he is in love with Guenever, but also loves Arthur deeply and does not know what he can possibly do. This depression weakens him, exposing him to the sly seductions of Elaine.



The next morning, Lancelot wakes up heavy-headed, confused and in a strange room. The body lying next to him is not that of Guenever, but Elaine. Lancelot is shocked and saddened, but also furious and threatens to kill Elaine: Lancelot had cherished his virginity as though it were the source of his power, and feels that now his strength has been taken from him. Elaine, it turns out, had tricked Lancelot into bed because she is in love with him. Disgusted, Lancelot leaves the castle and returns to Camelot.

By losing his virginity, Lancelot believes he has lost all his knightly skill and power. It is as if his virginity has kept his fundamental sense of impurity at bay. However, once he has lost his virginity, this leaves him free to pursue Guenever—because he feels he no longer has any purity to protect.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 13

Guenever is stitching her tapestry and thinking of Lancelot: she is twenty-two and rife with emotions. It isn't that she doesn't love Arthur, she loves and respects him as her husband, but has never loved him passionately as she does Lancelot. She drops her needle suddenly—there is the clatter of horse hooves on cobbles. And then, Lancelot is in her room, embracing her furiously. Before she is quite sure of what is happening, Guenever is betraying her husband, as she knew all along she would.

In this chapter, White describes Guenever's complexity and the range of emotions it requires to betray a husband you love. What White attempts is to portray Guenever as a real person, one who is complex, both guilty and innocent.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 14

One morning, Arthur announces that he has received a letter from Lancelot's father—he is being attacked and needs Arthur's help to quell the attack. Arthur asks Lancelot to stay behind at court. Lancelot and Guenever enjoy a year of uninterrupted bliss together. Lancelot begins to tell Guenever about the hole in his soul, the thing he has always felt was missing. Guenever merely laughs at him and says he is selfish for thinking things like that. Nevertheless, their relationship becomes stronger, they argue, bicker and Lancelot tells Guenever about Elaine—although not about him losing his virginity.

Merlyn told Arthur, years ago, that Guenever and Lancelot would betray him, yet he asks Lancelot to stay at court with Guenever for a full year. White never comments



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 15

Finally, King Arthur returns from France and Lancelot and Guenever's bliss is destroyed—but not because of Arthur's return. Sir Bors (Lancelot's cousin) had also just returned to court from visiting King Pellès and brings news that Elaine has given birth to a son and named him Galahad (Lancelot's first name).

In giving birth to Lancelot's son, Elaine draws attention to something uncommented upon previously—Guenever's continued childlessness.



Later that evening, when alone together, Guenever confronts Lancelot: she accuses him of lying to her, of being in love with Elaine and keeping it a secret. Lancelot tries to explain, about the butler and the deceit, and that he hadn't been able to tell her because he didn't want to hurt her. Eventually the two reconcile, but their relationship is forever changed. They love one another more than ever, but their love is bound in hatred, jealousy and betrayal.

This fundamental change in the lovers' relationship will continue to plague both the two and the entire court—Guenever's jealousy and mistrust, and Lancelot's son with another woman.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 16

At the Castle of Corbin, Elaine is preparing for her journey to Camelot; she has decided to try and win Lancelot from Guenever. Being young and immature, she is not versed in the art of seduction and believes just by dressing in a sophisticated gown, she might have a chance of getting him to leave Guenever for her.

Elaine is one of the most tragic characters in the novel—she is deeply in love with Lancelot but her only means to have him is through deceit.



One afternoon, Arthur comes across Lancelot in the rose garden looking wretched. Arthur knows deep down about Lancelot and Guenever's affair, but chooses to ignore it. He is capable of neither jealousy nor malice and thus unable to confront what is so obvious to everyone else. He is a simple, affectionate man and has simply become more reserved. He asks Lancelot if anything is the matter—perhaps it is the girl Elaine and the son she claims is Lancelot's. Lancelot confesses the whole tale of Elaine to Arthur. Later, Guenever finds Lancelot in the rose-garden. She is stiff and cold. She informs Lancelot that Elaine is at the gates of Camelot with his child in her arms.

The story Lancelot tells Arthur about Elaine—although true—is only part of the truth of why Lancelot feels deeply impure. However, it gives Arthur some truth to hang on to, some alternate tale to stave off knowledge of Guenever's betrayal.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 18

The next morning, Lancelot and Elaine are summoned to Guenever's chamber. Lancelot is content; the night before he had been summoned to Guenever's chamber in the darkness and they had made up in silence. When the two enter the Queen's chamber, she is stiff and drained of color. She asks Lancelot quietly, "Where did you go last night?" Lancelot is confused; Guenever's stiffness breaks and she screams at Lancelot to leave her castle immediately.

History has repeated itself—once more Elaine has seduced Lancelot and tricked Guenever. Elaine is a complex character and White describes her in such a manner that the reader simultaneously emphasizes with her plight, respects her, but also deeply condemns her.



Elaine speaks calmly: "Lancelot was in my room last night...He thought he was coming to you." The Queen does not believe the same lie again, she screams at Lancelot and Elaine. Finally, Lancelot (who has been sitting in a ball on the floor, speaking "Guenever" and "Arthur") gives a loud shriek, hurls himself through the window (the room is on the first floor) and runs off through the grounds.

Lancelot's descent into madness is an unexpected turn and exposes his fundamental weakness: he is deeply loyal to both Guenever and Arthur but, fearing now that he has betrayed them both, he cannot bear it and his deep sense of impurity overwhelms his mind, turning him mad.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 19

It is two years later and King Pelles is sitting in his study with a friend, Sir Bliant. Sir Bliant tells King Pelles the story of the Wild Man: a few years ago, Sir Bliant had been hunting in the woods when a naked man ran into his pavilion. Sir Bliant had taken the man back to his castle where he had fed and looked after him for over a year. Sometime later, Sir Bliant was out falconing alone when two errant knights had attacked him. He had rode back to his castle all the while being chased by the two knights. Suddenly, the Wild Man had appeared from nowhere, attacked the two knights and saved Sir Bliant. A few months after this, the Wild Man had rode away with a boar hunt and supposedly been killed. The rumor is this man was Sir Lancelot.

Lancelot, even without his mind, maintains some of his fundamental qualities—his knightly skill and his loyalty to those around him, here being Sir Bliant.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 20

After Sir Bliant leaves, King Pelles hears a noise in the street: a wild man is running through the village streets straight to the castle gates. King Pelles goes outside where a crowd has gathered around the wild man; he asks him if he is Sir Lancelot, but the man only roars aggressively. King Pelles orders him to be locked up.

The following week, the King's nephew Castor is being knighted. At the celebrations, King Pelles drunkenly orders all the men to put on the new gowns he had bought for the occasion. He demands that someone bring the wild man to the Great Hall. King Pelles places his own gown on the shoulders of the wild man. Suddenly, Sir Lancelot, thin, unshaven and dirty, stands straight and regal in the middle of the hall and the sea of Nobles part for him as he walks out.

It seems fated that the place that ultimately led to Lancelot's madness—where he was seduced by Elaine—is the place in which he is finally found after years wandering through England without a mind.



The inevitability which follows Arthur does, to a certain extent, follow both Lancelot and Guenever. It is not simply that Lancelot is found at the place which caused him to lose his mind, but that Pelles chose to drape him with a coat—thus exposing his regal bearing—just as Wart was revealed to be king by lifting the sword from the stone. The placing of the coat on Lancelot's shoulders also symbolically can be seen as society being draped back over Lancelot. He had escaped from the shame and guilt of society by turning wild, but now society returns to him and not only is he recognized, but he seems to recognize himself.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 21

The following morning Elaine is walking in the castle garden with Galahad. She does not grieve for Lancelot; she barely thinks about him now. One of the girls beckons her over—there is a man sleeping by the well. Elaine recognizes Lancelot immediately; last night, Lancelot had washed his face and tried to clean up his hair and he is lying in a royal gown. Elaine kneels beside Lancelot and looks at him. She does not cry but only strokes his hand.

Elaine's empathy and love for Lancelot has now, after many years, matured. She is no longer desperate for his love and attention, but simply wants to comfort and care for him. Her love is vastly different from Guenever's—which is difficult, jealous and intense.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 22

Lancelot recovers slowly. Elaine visits him once a day, but does not cry or bother him. One day, Lancelot asks her what he should do; he cannot stay there, nor can he return to court. Elaine says that her father could give them a castle and they could live together. Lancelot considers this, but says he could never marry her because he does not love her. Elaine agrees, knowing that he will never love her.

It seems as if Lancelot and Elaine might be able to begin a life together and to forgive one another for their past betrayals. However, Lancelot can never truly love Elaine and this is her vulnerability and downfall—her belief and hope that he may one day come to love her.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 23

Spring arrives and Elaine throws a tournament for five hundred knights at her and Lancelot's new home. But, the Chevalier Mal Fet (Lancelot's new name) knocks down every single one without hurting anyone, and the whole tournament is a failure. Later, after the tournament, Elaine follows Lancelot to the battlements where he stands in a blaze of gold gazing desperately towards Camelot. His new shield with its image of a silver woman and a knight kneeling before her stands at his side. For the first time, Elaine realizes the woman is wearing a crown.

One morning, Elaine and Lancelot are sitting on the banks of the moat with Galahad when two strangers are announced, demanding to joust with the Chevalier. The jousting session with the first knight is a long, tedious affair because Lancelot patiently counters the other knight's thrusts and gives no attacks. Suddenly the knight throws down his helm and demands to know who Lancelot is and his identity is revealed. The knight—Degalis—claims Lancelot's brother Ector is the other knight at the gates. They are reunited and introduced to Elaine—she knows now she must host the people who will break her heart.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 24

Lancelot is resolute to the remonstrations of the knights—he will not leave Elaine. They tell him that the Queen spent twenty thousand pounds looking for him; they talk about gossip from the court; how distraught both Arthur and Guenever have been since he left. Slowly, Lancelot's resolution begins to waver. He says, however, that he cannot leave Elaine; she has been good to him and he has grown to love her.

The knights have been staying with them for a week now and Elaine knows she is going to lose Lancelot. She makes him promise that if he does leave, he will one day return to her. She tells him there is a man waiting outside the moat and that he must go to him. The man is Uncle Dap; he has Lancelot's horse and all his old armor folded neatly. Lancelot takes his armor and feels its familiar weight and curvature in his hands. He remembers Guenever—the real Guenever, not the one he has imagined. As Lancelot rides away, he does not look back; Elaine, watching from the battlements, does not wave.

Lancelot may be jousting again, but he is not the same knight he used to be—he has lost his passion and spirit. Up until this point, Elaine had been deceiving herself that Lancelot would be content living with her in relative obscurity. But, when she sees his shield and realizes the woman is Guenever (because the woman is wearing a crown), she knows then that he will one day leave her.



Now that Lancelot's identity has been revealed, it is only a matter of time before he returns to Camelot. Knowing this, Elaine does not try to interfere; much like Arthur, she simply accepts what is inevitable with a humility both endearing and pathetic.



It is poignant that Lancelot says he loves Elaine—although it is unclear whether he truly means it. It appears he has grown to love her in the much the same way as Guenever loves Arthur—with fondness and esteem, but not with passion.



When Lancelot promises Elaine he will return, this gives Elaine the hope she needs to keep on living—although Lancelot does not consider the weight of those words.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 25

Fifteen years pass. Everyone is much the same, except older. Most of the original knights are still at court, except there are a horde of new ones who know Arthur only as the accepted conqueror and Lancelot as the hero of a hundred victories. The two are now legends, idealized by common folk. Moreover, the land of England is changed radically: it is sophisticated and civilized. Before men ate with their bloodied hands in dark, musty halls, now men and women alike eat with hands clean from herb-scented soap in halls bright and airy. Young, ambitious knights flock to Arthur's courts. One of the young men who come is Gareth; another is Mordred.

In this chapter, White describes the many changes wrought to the realm since Arthur has been in power. Arthur has civilized England and made it more enlightened. However, not all this change is good—there are now fashions and cliques. Political intrigue is rife. Moreover, Mordred—Arthur's son and downfall—arrives at court.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 26

Arthur and Lancelot are watching Gareth practice with his bow. Gareth became a knight by escaping from Orkney and becoming a serving boy in the kitchens at Camelot. Lancelot had noticed him, trained and then knighted him—all before his brothers knew who he was. While they watch, Gareth receives a letter; he reads it over and the color drains from his face. He tells Arthur and Lancelot that his brothers, Agravaine, Mordred and Gawaine have killed his mother because they found her in bed with Pellinore's son Sir Lamorak and then stabbed Sir Lamorak in the back.

The cruel and perverse killing of Morgause by her own sons illustrates the peculiar relationship she maintained with her children. Her neglect made them devoted to her and intensely jealous of her attention. Finding her devoting that attention elsewhere and in a dishonorable way proves too much for them. The stabbing of Lamorak in the back indicates a willingness to "play dirty" that is foreboding.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 27

Gawaine and Mordred arrive at Camelot—although they do not know where Agravaine is. Gawaine is deeply saddened by his actions and penitent in the cold light of day. The two wait upon the King; Gawaine bows to the floor in humility, Mordred bows too but looks Arthur sardonically in the eye. Mordred is a thin, peculiar looking man. Arthur, surprising all those gathered there, pardons them.

This is the reader's first encounter with Mordred—coming to atone for having killed his mother. Mordred, unlike Gawaine, is not sorry for the murders committed and seems strangely content with his conscience. His manner—meeting his father's eyes in a way that suggests his sense of both equality with him and hatred for him—seems deeply foreboding.



When the two leave, Lancelot and Guenever look questioningly at Arthur who is awash with rage. Finally, Arthur begins to speak: he recognizes that the ideas of the round table need to be revived. They have achieved justice, they have used Might to conquer Right, but there is still Might. Idleness has made the knights use their Might for wicked things. Arthur continues: the knights need spiritual channels for their violence. Guenever is skeptical, but Lancelot's eyes burn with excitement. He suggests they start a quest for the **Holy Grail** and direct the energy and spirit of the knights towards a religious and spiritual end.

Arthur's first idea—the Order of the Round Table—has failed. Murder and violence is still being committed. Lancelot is excited about the idea of a Quest for the Holy Grail because of his fundamental sense of impurity—he thinks that the Holy Grail might afford him spiritual salvation.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 28

The knights are sent out on their quests and two years pass. Slowly, knights begin to trickle back in twos and threes, limping, worn, confused and fantastical. One day, Gawaine returns. The King and Queen settle in the Great Hall to hear the tales of his adventures. Gawaine's story is of Galahad's piety and virginity; of violence committed unnecessarily; and of Gawaine accidentally killing a fellow knight.

Gawaine is the first to return from the Quest—but his story is not of religious reformation. Rather, Gawaine somewhat naively recounts how he had killed a fellow knight and thus failed the tests posed to him as part of the questing process. Gawaine is depicted throughout the novel as a good person whose natural brutal instincts often get the better of him.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 29

The next knight to return is Sir Lionel who has been questing with his brother Sir Bors. Arthur and Guenever sit in the Great Hall and listen to his tales. Lionel talks about Sir Bors' new found piety. He tells of Sir Bors' trials with a lady he rescued from an errant knight and he restrained from killing; of a man coming dressed as a priest and saying a woman was doomed to die unless Sir Bors made love to her (Sir Bors refused and the woman threw herself off the castle, but then the castle vanished and it turned out the woman had been a fiend); and of Sir Lionel's own trial when he had been tempted to kill his brother for leaving him to be beaten to death. However, at the last moment, a hermit had stopped him (although Lionel then killed the hermit) and the brothers began to dance and kiss.

The triumphs of Sir Bors that purify him spiritually seem, as White describes them, strangely selfish and cruel—he had not known the women were fiends and he left them to die. In this manner, the novel comments upon the spiritual piety of the questing genre—where many of the trials include the necessary sacrifice of another, such as Lionel's murder of the hermit.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 30

The next arrival is Sir Aglovale, one of the young sons of the late King Pellinore, wearing a black sash for his late mother. Aglovale wants to kill Mordred and Gawaine in vengeance for his brother. Arthur reasons with him; Arthur says that he himself could have punished the brothers but there is no reason to keep up the bloodshed and the feuding. Arthur says he will let Aglovale decide if he wants to kill the brothers but that their lives have been unhappy and they have also lost loved ones in this fight.

Arthur asks Aglovale to not avenge his brother and thus break the cycle of feuding—this refers back to a conversation Arthur had had with Merlyn when he was newly crowned. Merlyn had spoken about the justifications of war and how people must need forget historical feuds to prevent further bloodshed. This is what Arthur is asking of Aglovale—to practice forgiveness and save the need for more violence.



Still undecided, Aglovale proceeds to narrate his adventures. He recounts the tale of his brother Sir Percivale who had been much like Pellinore and whose letter had been found in the hands of their dead sister. Percy had been trying to follow Galahad but was tricked by a witch and found himself in a desert with no horse. After many trials, he finally came across a holy boat intended to take people to the **Holy Grail**.

Sir Percival is allowed to enter the boat—that will take them to the Holy Grail—because of his innocence and purity. Percival, much like his father Pellinore, is a clumsy bumbling knight. White's depiction of him as that to some extent deflates the idealization of the Grail mythology—Percival is innocent, but he is neither perfect nor perfectly chivalric.



Meanwhile their sister, a nun, received a vision. Galahad was staying at a hermitage not far away; she found him and took him to the holy barge where Percy and Bors were waiting. On the way to Carlisle in the vessel, they were waylaid at a castle where a woman had the measles and could only be cured if she bathed in the blood of a virgin. The knights tried to protect Aglovale's sister but, ultimately, she gave herself up. She asked that her body be sent out to sea in a vessel and that is how Aglovale found her, clutching Percy's letter in her hand.

Aglovale's sister's sacrifice seems somewhat meaningless—it does not aid the knights to find the Grail, and the lady is only suffering from the measles. Her sacrifice is thus simultaneously pious and satiric: the piety is lessened because it seems meaningless and exercised by the sister so quickly and unquestionably.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 31

Still, there is no news of Lancelot. Rumors circulate of Lancelot unhorsed, defeated, dead. Finally, one wet and miserable day, Lancelot comes back, leading a white mare out of the rainstorm. The whole court gathers but Arthur quickly ushers them away. Two hours later, Uncle Dap presents himself to the King and informs him that the **Holy Grail** has been found by Galahad, Percival, and Bors who are with it now, carrying it to Babylon; Bors will eventually return home, the others will not.

The moment in which Arthur learns the Holy Grail has been found is anti-climatic: he is told by Uncle Dap, rather than Lancelot himself, and little seems to be changed by this news. Indeed, the knights who did find it will never return, suggesting that the goodness and purity that Arthur hoped to instill in his knight's through the quest is actually impossible for normal people living in the real world to attain. In some ways, the quest is powerful only for so long as it is incomplete, because in its completion the ideal that motivated is revealed as an illusion.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 32

Guenever is overdressed for the occasion—her face is too painted. Lancelot however sees the same girl of twenty, trying desperately to defy the doom of human destiny. Lancelot tells Arthur and Guenever about his altered state of being—he has become more devout and spiritual.

Lancelot's quest—although it did not culminate in him finding the Holy Grail—has led to a reformation of his character.



He had started his **Quest** by travelling to King Peles' castle, but was waylaid on the journey when he was dismounted by Galahad. Angry and with his pride hurt, he had ridden to a chapel. While he slept, he dreamt a knight came and took all his armor and weapons and, when he woke, all his knightly things were gone. He confessed the biggest sin on his conscience (Lancelot seems about to spill the secret of his relationship with Guenever, but she stops him).

The sin Lancelot confesses is of his relationship with Guenever. When he makes as if to tell Arthur—this would have made his purification complete—Guenever interrupts and does not let him. She is not ready to face that sin, and his love for her stops him from confessing it for both of them.



Lancelot was given penance and rode away. He came across two warring sides in a tournament and decided to join the losing side to rescue them. However, still they lost and he was taken prisoner, beaten and disgraced. He realized he had done penance for one sin, but not for another—the pride that makes him show off and compete for the losing side. He confessed again. Next he rode onwards and was knocked down by a black knight in defeat again. Although he had been truly absolved, God was not going to give him back his vice simply because he had confessed.

The second sin Lancelot must confess to is the very sin Arthur has been trying to purify his realm of—the act of doing good has become simply another form of knightly egotism instead of an act of justice.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 33

After this third defeat, he had a dream in which a ship came to him. In the morning, he came across a ship; he boarded it and set sail for weeks. Inside the ship was the body of a dead woman clutching a letter. One day, Galahad came to them and lived in the ship for months. They had adventures with animals and learned to care for one another.

One Monday, they arrived at a forestland where a white knight was waiting to take Galahad to the **Holy Grail**. Lancelot knew he would not be taken too, but asked Galahad to pray for him. The ship took Lancelot out to sea again alone. He prayed to learn some tidings of the Holy Grail.

Finally, the ship came alongside a castle when it was black as death. Lancelot put on his armor and snuck into the castle until he came to a chapel. It was the most beautiful chapel he had ever seen. He couldn't go inside, but could see Galahad, Bors and Percival, and knights from other lands; and on a silver table was the **Holy Grail**.

Galahad is a strangely pious knight, whose goodness means he is almost unreal. However, while they are together for six months, Lancelot—for the first time—gets to know his son.



Lancelot's unspoken emphasis about the reason he cannot be taken to the Holy Grail is his relationship with Guenever that has forever besmirched his soul.



Although Lancelot was not granted to find the Grail, he was allowed to see it and know that it has been found. This is arguably the closest a knight can come to the Grail, and still be an imperfect soul who can live on (as opposed to Galahad and Percivale).



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 34

The Queen is sitting in her bathing chamber surrounded by a profusion of jewelry boxes, garments and perfumes. Guenever is no longer painted; she is happy and contented again although Lancelot has not yet come back to her—but she knows he will eventually. The real tragedy of Guenever's life is that she is childless: Arthur has two illegitimate children and Lancelot has Galahad. But she will never have a child; later in her life, this will break her.

In this chapter, White exposes the complex character of Guenever—it acts as a reminder that Guenever is a complex character who is not bad because she betrays Arthur, but is simply flawed. We also come to empathize with her because of her childlessness.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 35

The days and weeks of waiting for Lancelot to come back to Guenever turn into months. Guenever grows angrier, angry at Lancelot's selfishness, for abandoning her soul to save his own. Lancelot sees these things too, but cannot give up his newfound purity.

White describes—as Guenever sees it—a certain selfishness to Lancelot's piety. His piety comes at the cost of Guenever's happiness—in this manner it seems immoral that piety can sacrifice another's well-being.



This all comes to a head one morning while they are singing alone together. Mid-song, Guenever closes the music books. She asks Lancelot to leave again; she does not want to quarrel or make a scene, but he is wearing her out and it would be easier if he were not there. Lancelot stands up and walks to the window. Suddenly he speaks in a harsh voice: "If you like, we will start again." He swings round to find the room empty. He packs his scanty belongings and sets off from Camelot the following morning.

This scene exposes the fragility of Lancelot's religiosity: with only gentle convincing, he is willing to give up his months of trial to be with Guenever again.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 36

The atmosphere at court has changed. The best half of the knights have been killed in the quest for the **Holy Grail**. What Arthur had feared has occurred: if you achieve perfection, you die. Now, the court is too fashionable and exotic. People judge Guenever with harsh and calculating eyes, while people consider Arthur a hypocrite. Arthur is reserved and unhappy in this new environment and moves about the palace in plain dress, being polite to people.

Guenever, however, tries desperately to be a fashionable hostess. She decides to host a dinner for twenty-four knights and buys the best apples because she knows Gawaine is most fond of apples (the Orkney faction has become more powerful and Guenever knows she must placate her husband's enemies). Unfortunately, there are other people at court who consider Gawaine an enemy and Sir Pinel poisons the apples.

At the dinner, the poison goes astray and kills a different knight, Sir Patrick, instead. Guenever is the hostess of the dinner, the one who bought the apples, and so everyone believes she is responsible and Sir Mador accuses the Queen of treason. She is to be tried by a Court of Honor—where two champions fight on behalf of the prosecutor and defendant. Arthur cannot, by the rules, fight on behalf of his wife and Lancelot is absent from court. Guenever (because of her unpopularity) has no other knight to ask and begs Sir Bors on her knees to fight as her champion.

BOOK 3, CHAPTER 37

The morning of the fight dawns—Arthur and Guenever barely slept the night before. A pavilion has been erected for the event where Guenever will be burned at the stake if her champion loses. Before Arthur began his work, his Queen would never have been put on trial. Just now a new idea was beginning to form in the King's mind about justice—about using Right as a criterion unto itself that does not lean on power to carry out justice (in a few years, he would invent Civil Law).

Arthur's civilizing influence on his court has turned against him. Having enlightened people, given them freedom of expression and safety, the court has now become a hub of political intrigue. This is something Arthur, being innocent and good-hearted, is fundamentally unable to tackle.



Guenever's failed attempt to become a fashionable figure at court is pathetic and exposes her, now, as a weak figure. Moreover, the violence Arthur has so painfully tried to tackle is appearing in new ways: instead of blatant violence, violence has disguised itself, become political intrigue and assassination plots.



The fact that Guenever has no knight willing to be her champion (now that Lancelot is absent) and must beg Sir Bors illustrates how unpopular the monarchs have become in their own court.



Arthur continually attempts to establish new forms of governance, which might be better and more just. While, quite untruthfully, attributes the invention of Civil Law to Arthur, to emphasize his position as a political innovator. It is worth noting that is the trial of honor of the queen that leads Arthur to change his court system, but that the changed court system—which is more just—still leads to Guenever being embroiled in an even more damaging trial later on. No matter the improvements that Arthur makes, he cannot remove the cruelty inherent in men (or women) or their manipulation of his improved systems.



It is cold and Guenever sitting in the stands, looks older than ever. Naturally, Lancelot is the one to rescue her—Sir Bors had sped off to find Lancelot as soon as the Queen had asked him to be her champion. Sir Mador proceeds from the south end and proclaims the accusation. There is a long period of silence and the audience becomes restless. Then, out of the north end, Lancelot rides wearing Sir Bors' armor—although it is apparent it is Lancelot. Lancelot dismounts Sir Mador and, after a brief skirmish with swords, unhelms him. After the victory, King Arthur comes down from the box, leading a sobbing Guenever, and bows before Lancelot.

Lancelot's sudden re-appearance does, to a certain extent, re-establish him as a chivalrous knight. Moreover, White describes his entry as both chivalric, but also expected—as though he was never going to have done anything but this. This description deflates the magnanimous nature of his return.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 38

The next day, Nimue arrives at Camelot on behalf of Merlyn (who is locked in a cave) and clears up the whole Patrick accusation with her foresight. Although this is resolved and Lancelot returned to save the Queen, he still will not give up his loyalty to God. Guenever grows angrier by the day and begins to convince herself that she never loved him.

Lancelot and Guenever's relationship is fraught with bitterness—she will not accept his religiosity and becomes a petulant, demanding woman.



Just at this time, Arthur arranges a tournament that happens to take place near the Castle Corbin—where Elaine now lives out her middle-age. The Queen is bitter and accuses Lancelot of wanting to go to the tournament so he can see Elaine; she makes him promise not to go. However, when the day dawns for the tournament, Guenever regrets this and tells Lancelot firmly that he *must* go. Lancelot feels as though his heart is breaking in two and fears the madness she once pushed him to. Nevertheless, he sets out for Corbin.

Once more, Guenever is transformed into a petulant, selfish woman—just as when she turned him mad. Lancelot accepts this side to her and simply does as she commands, deeply saddened but unable to not love her.



As he rides towards Corbin, Lancelot is surprised to see Elaine standing on the battlements where he left her twenty years before. She has grown plain and dumpy. She has been waiting for him. With the following words, Elaine sends a stab through Lancelot's heart: "You will be staying for good now."

Elaine's tragedy is her dogged faithfulness. Despite the fact that she once seduced Lancelot, White describes her as a faithful, tortured woman so that we compare Guenever's petulance to Elaine's patience.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 39

Lancelot is successful at the tournament. He wears a favor made for him by Elaine—although he never usually wears favors (pitying her, he agrees to wear it, thinking it will aid his disguise). However, after he has knocked thirty or forty, Lancelot is set upon by three knights who penetrate his armor with a spear. He is carried, unconscious and wounded, back to the Castle Corbin to be cared for by Elaine.

Again, just as after he was found as a mad-man, Lancelot is cared for by Elaine. This posture is symbolic for their relationship: he can only stay with her while he is infirm and he will leave her as soon as he is better.



Before the tournament, Lancelot had been unable to tell Elaine he would not be staying for good; and now, as she nurses him, he does not have the strength too. At Corbin, Elaine and Lancelot are holding hands. Elaine keeps saying how she has him for good now. Finally, gently, Lancelot tells her they must speak.

When Lancelot tells Elaine that they must speak, he means to tell her that he is going to break his promise and will not be staying with her for good. This is the final heartbreak for Elaine, who believes that she finally has her Lancelot.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 40

When Lancelot returns to Camelot, Guenever is in a rage. She believes Elaine has become his mistress and his commitment to God was all a lie. They fight, but have moments of reconciliation.

In comparison to the tolerant sweetness of Elaine, Guenever is almost a disgusting figure in her bitterness and rage.



One morning, a death barge floats down the river to the palace walls. Inside the barge is the plump body of an aged Elaine—she has committed perhaps the only strong act of her life, she has taken her own life. She had had no son, no lover, and thus nothing left. "Why were you not kinder to her?" cried the Queen. "Why could you not have given her something to live for?"

When Guenever accuses Lancelot of not being kind to Elaine, she truly means it. Yet, her sudden sensitivity seems artificial and forgetful of the role she played in Elaine's suicide.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 41

Life at court continues. At the next tournament, something strange happens: Arthur challenges Lancelot, sets upon him and tries to hurt him. It is as if, for the first time, Arthur is the cuckold and Lancelot his betrayer.

Throughout most of Book III, Arthur's interior thoughts are closed to the reader—unlike Lancelot's. This makes sense, as Arthur has made himself into a kind of ideal. He is not so much a man as a figurehead and protector of a system of justice. Thus, we never truly understand Arthur's feelings towards the lovers. This incident is therefore startling and exposes a degree of personal bitterness that Arthur must harbor.



At court, there is a cockney knight called Sir Meliagrance who is judged by Mordred's fashions as not up to scratch; he is also madly in love with Guenever. So, one afternoon, while Arthur and Lancelot are playing bowls, a young messenger arrives the Queen, on her way back from collecting flowers and armed only with ten knights, had been set upon by Sir Meliagrance and a band of knights. Many of the Queen's men were wounded and Guenever soon gave herself up to Sir Meliagrance as long as he would take the wounded knights with them to his castle, and let them stay in her antechamber. Sir Meliagrance, not really a rogue, agreed to these terms.

Sir Meliagrance's attempt to kidnap Guenever is comedic—as White describes, Meliagrance is not really a rogue, but has been driven to this by snobbery at court. This he blunders and gives into the Queen's demands—although he is the armed Knight, he has given Guenever all of the agency in her own kidnapping.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 42

By the time Sir Meliagrance arrives at his castle with Guenever, he knows Lancelot will soon arrive. He decides the best thing to do is to blockade the castle so Lancelot will have to lay siege to it. However, the castle is in disorganized mayhem: people are trying to herd cattle in from the farmland; maids are fetching water in tubs and bringing it into the castle; and Sir Meliagrance is trying hurriedly to ready his guest chambers for Guenever.

Finally, as Guenever sits at the window dressing some of her knights' wounds, there is a clattering outside; coming towards the castle, riding a cart and pulling a mangled-looking horse behind, is Lancelot. Sir Meliagrance had him held up by archers (hence the mangled horse), but had not counted on Lancelot finding a cart. Lancelot storms up the drawbridge and through the gates before they can be closed. Meanwhile, Meliagrance has fled to Guenever and, kneeling, asks desperately for her forgiveness. She grants it. When Guenever sees Lancelot standing in the inner courtyard, and he sees her, it is as if the Grail quest and Elaine has never happened. They are lovers once more. Having forgiven Meliagrance, they decide to stay the night at his castle.

The narrator describes Meliagrance's failed attempt to kidnap Guenever in highly satirical ways—his castle is ill prepared and Meliagrance's main concern is making Guenever's room comfortable (because he is in love with her).



Even Lancelot in his rescue of Guenever is highly comedic—he is in full armor but is riding a carthorse. The whole event is humorous and subverts the traditional chivalric rescue of a lover.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 43

Guenever's chamber has no glass windows, but iron bars on it. That night, Lancelot finds a ladder in the garden and climbs to her window. They speak, about Arthur and their betrayal of him, about Lancelot's God and about Guenever's childlessness. While they speak, Lancelot cuts the iron bars out with his hands and spends the night in her bed.

The next morning, Guenever sleeps late. Sir Meliagrance is impatient for her to leave and so, finally, enters her chamber to wake her. However, he sees blood all over the sheets (from Lancelot's hand with the bars) and quickly accuses her of having had one of the wounded soldiers in her bed. The accusations escalate and Lancelot, who enters, demands that Meliagrance either forget his accusations or challenge the Queen's champion. This Sir Meliagrance does and it is agreed that he and Lancelot will fight.

Sir Meliagrance asks Lancelot if they can remain cordial despite their impending fight because he wants to show Lancelot his castle. This they do until they come to a chamber with a trap door. Lancelot falls sixty feet through the trap door onto a bed of hay; Meliagrance hides his horse and tells Guenever that Lancelot has already set off for Camelot.

White does not describe what happens in the room, but only conjectures. The narrator is an omniscient one—he can see and comment on everything—yet chooses to draw back for this scene as though to give the lovers some privacy.



It is ironic that Meliagrance rightly accuses Guenever of being unfaithful to the king—but chooses the wrong knight with whom she has been unfaithful. Lancelot quickly defends her, but feels conflicted by it because he knows Meliagrance's accusation is fundamentally right.



Meliagrance's plan to imprison Lancelot is surprising—up until this point he is simply depicted as a bumbling, idiotic knight.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 44

The second trial by combat is more sensational than the first. Lancelot arrives at the very last minute, riding one of Sir Meliagrance's white horses. Meliagrance goes down at the first charge and refuses to get up. Lancelot offers him new terms: a fight to the death with Lancelot only wearing armor on the right side of his body and with his left hand tied behind his back. Even half-naked, Lancelot quickly decapitates the other knight.

Lancelot strips off half his armor to ensure it is a fair fight—but this only adds to the trial's sensationalism. Lancelot is still conflicted as he knows he will kill a man whose accusation is true.



BOOK 3, CHAPTER 45

Arthur, Guenever and Lancelot are on the eve of their Indian summer—gossip has been silenced and discourtesy put down. Arthur's kingdom is finally at peace.

It seems as if peace has been reached—yet many of the feuds and accusations at court have not been resolved, and are simply hidden for the time being.



However, Lancelot has to face one last challenge. There is a knight, Sir Urre from Hungary, who in his last tournament sustained so many wounds that they would never heal. It is said a curse had been put on him, and only the hands of the greatest knight in the world would close the wounds. Sir Urre has finally made it across the Channel to Britain and is asking for Lancelot to heal him. Arthur arranges it that at the Pentecost feast at the Carlisle court, every knight will attempt to heal Sir Urre.

Early in his life, Lancelot hoped to one day perform a miracle. However, since losing his virginity and starting a relationship with Guenever, he had laid all such hopes to rest—believing he was not pure enough. However, now he has an opportunity to perform such a miracle.



It is the feast of Pentecost and Lancelot is hiding in the harness-room. Whole lines of Knights are waiting to heal Sir Urre—half of them already having failed. Lancelot does not wish to try this miracle; he knows he will fail and knows then all the people will see his shame.

Despite his hope to perform a miracle, Lancelot does not want to attempt it: he knows that if he fails, his mythic persona will be destroyed, and he believes that because of his sins that he will fail. He cannot bear the thought of his pride and egotism being exposed.



Finally, it is Lancelot's turn. He kneels next to Sir Urre but pleads with Arthur not to make him do this. But Arthur commands him too. Over in the stands, Guenever watches as Lancelot touches the knight. Suddenly, people are gathering around the two knights; Arthur is crying and gentlemen throw their hats. She hears "It shut like a box!" Meanwhile, Lancelot is kneeling next to the healed Sir Urre, weeping.

In healing the knight, Lancelot begins weeping. This is a form of breaking point in his character where he realizes, for the first time, that his sins are not overarching, that there is some purity to him still.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 1

The years have not been kind to Agravaine—he looks much older than his forty-five years and has become a drunk. Mordred, meanwhile, looks the same as ever—a thin, wisp of a man decadently dressed. The two are in the cloisters of the Orkney palace at Camelot. They are arguing over the best way to start a rebellion against the king. Mordred's hate for Arthur knows no bounds; he wants to rebel because Arthur slept with his mother and then left Mordred to die. Agravaine argues with him, saying his personal feud with Arthur will never motivate any kind of rebellion—the reason needs to be something larger, more political, that all men can get behind.

The conversation moves to the subject of Lancelot—whereas before, Mordred had been enraged and Agravaine indifferent, now they are reversed. Agravaine raves about Lancelot's infidelity with the Queen. Suddenly, however, Agravaine has an idea: suppose they were to raise the issue of Lancelot's infidelity under Arthur's new judicial laws; Arthur would have to do something about it then. Doing so, Arthur's power would be split and then would be their chance for revolt.

Agravaine's advice to Mordred is intelligent—just as Merlyn spoke to Arthur about years before (although for very different reasons), to succeed in a revolt/warfare, you must have a stated reason larger than something personal so that multitudes of people can support and justify it—although the real reason may still be something personal. This is a direct illusion to the mechanisms at work in the Nazi party during WWII: the personal ravings of one man turned into a national political movement.



Agravaine suggests they manipulate Arthur's new judicial laws so that Guenever is tried by a jury rather than in trial by combat. It is Arthur's tragedy that his political innovations to uphold justice will be used by those working, not for justice, but solely to destroy his reign. The Orkney clan has found a way to continue to pursue their feud even within the England that has been transformed to a land of "justice".



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 2

Through the cloister doors come Sir Gawaine, Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth. The three brothers are aged, but still the same in all other manners. They have spent the day falconing and Sir Gareth explains in details their endeavors. Mordred, however, is only rude, especially when Gareth suggests he might call his new falcon Lancelotta.

Suddenly, the argument escalates and Agravaine pulls a sword on Gareth. Gawaine's old rage explodes and he pulls his own sword on Agravaine. Meanwhile, Mordred with a dagger flashing in his hand, moves to Gawaine's back, but his dagger is stopped in time by Gareth's hand.

It is at this moment, with Agravaine held at the floor with Gawaine's sword, Gaheris holding back Gawaine's arm and Gareth holding back Mordred's dagger, that the King enters the cloisters. He stops while the brothers quickly rearrange themselves, and then moves forward to kiss Mordred.

This is the first time we have seen all of the brothers together since they were children in Orkney and cut off a unicorn's head. All, excepting Agravaine and Mordred, are changed; they are kinder and more moral.



Despite this change in them, Gawaine is still unable to curb the instinctive violence in him; he is a reminder that Arthur's idea has failed and continues to fail because Right can never fully curb Might.



The scene Arthur encounters is somewhat ridiculous; but Arthur, old and somewhat tired, chooses to ignore their dispute. That he kisses Mordred—who at that moment is plotting against him—is an indication of Arthur's personal tragedy. He loves his son, for the simple reason that he is his son, and therefore cannot bring himself to see (or do anything about) Mordred's plotting.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 3

Lancelot and Guenever, now aged lovers, are sitting in the window of her solar, looking out over Arthur's medieval England. The land is unrecognizable to what it was before Arthur's rule. Before, Barons hung and slaughtered people at their will, cottagers bared their doors each night in fear, churches were used as forts and people died daily from diseases such as the black death. Now, there are libraries and universities, beautiful architecture, justice and law.

But, perhaps most importantly, there was a control over Might. During this period, the Catholic Church could even impose a peace on fighting—which was called The Truce of God and lasted Wednesday to Monday and during the whole of Advent and Lent.

There is peace in the realm now. What we witness from the lovers' eyes is a reformed England. White describes a kingdom of law, justice, intellect, and civilization. White's description is long and detailed and simply communicates how enlightened England has become.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 4

As Lancelot and Guenever sit in her solar, they sing together. They stop singing and begin to bicker, but the type of bickering lovers engage in. Lancelot asks if he can come to her room that night, Guenever is hesitant, scared of being caught. As they talk, neither of them notices Arthur's profile in the gathering twilight. Arthur leaves to find a page to announce him. The page clatters noisily up the stairs and alerts the lovers.

Arthur looks older now, but with a noble oldness. The King is worried about the Orkney brothers and asks both Guenever and Lancelot to listen as he tells them something that he did wrong: Arthur tells them the story of how, before he met Guenever, he was seduced by Morgause (also his half-sister, although he did not know it) who then had his son. People at court had frightened him, telling him all sorts of prophecies. In the end, Arthur had ordered all the babies born at that time to be put on a ship and left to drown. However, Mordred his son had been saved.

Arthur fears Mordred still bears him a grudge—which is why he tells the lovers this story. Guenever urges Arthur to imprison or kill Mordred for treason; Arthur will not because Mordred is his son. Plus, Arthur is King and must stand for law if he expects his people to act by the law.

Moreover, Arthur has not simply imposed enlightenment, but a control over Might. In this, Arthur seeks to achieve some kind of valuation of humanity above all other things.



The two lovers are finally content with one another. What this scene illustrates, however, is the role Arthur has played in their relationship: forever on the periphery, but still conscious of it and choosing not to interfere. Arthur sees what is happening, and is willing for it to happen. In a sense, he has sacrificed his own happiness for that of his country.



It is strange that White did not describe the incident with the boat at the period in which it happened in Arthur's life. This suggests that White, in the same way as Arthur himself, did not want to besmirch Arthur's characters so that when he tried to implement his great idea, it would be as the law itself—idealistic, pure and just. Instead, this incident (revealed only now) highlights Arthur's fundamental humanity and thus the likelihood his almost inhuman reign will fail.



This exchange captures the two aspects of Arthur's tragedy. That his own love for his son stops him from being able to intercede when that son is plotting against him. And that in creating a world of laws he has restrained himself from being able to intercede. The tragedy will be compounded when Mordred uses that same system of laws to trap Arthur, Guenever, and Lancelot.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 5

The Orkney brothers are waiting for Arthur in the justice room—a peculiar square-shaped room lined with tapestries. The brothers are arguing—Gareth, Gawaine and Gaheris want to be no part of the treason Agravaine and Mordred are plotting. Arthur enters the room quietly, but they all see him. Suddenly, declaring they are no part of it, Gawaine, Gaheris and Gareth sweep out of the room.

Mordred glares at his father; he boldly announces: "We came to tell you what every person in this court has always known. Queen Guenever is Sir Lancelot's mistress openly." Arthur only looks at the floor. He asks if they are ready to prove that accusation under the law. Agravaine asks that they use the new laws to prove the pair guilty, with a jury and a judge, instead of the old laws with trial by combat. They are slowing driving Arthur back; he agrees, but refuses to take part in any attempt to trap the lovers into providing proof. The elation in their voices disgusts Arthur.

Once more, the loyalty of three of the Orkney brothers illustrates how successful Arthur's reign has been thus far—he has healed the feud between the Gaels and the Normans so much that three of the Orkney clan would rather be loyal to him than to their own kin.



Arthur's England is at a transition point: Arthur has been developing the Law to replace things such as trial by combat. Agravaine has read up on Arthur's new laws and thus uses them against Arthur himself. Agravaine knows if the Queen is given trial by combat Lancelot will kill anyone he faces. But, if the pair are tried before a jury and there is evidence to prove their guilt, they will have to be killed.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 6

A few weeks later, Lancelot is pacing up and down his room, waiting for the Queen's summons; he knows that Arthur is away hunting and so the two can spend the night together. Suddenly, Gareth asks to enter. He has come to warn Lancelot not to go to the Queen's room that night. He explains that Agravaine and Mordred hate Lancelot and that they are going to do something to trap him. Lancelot dismisses Gareth, saying he knows the King would never do anything to trap him.

With this, there is a faint scratching on Lancelot's door. Gareth begs him once more not to answer but Lancelot barely acknowledges him. He grabs his cloak and steps out into the darkness of the passage. He has forgotten his sword.

Lancelot is arrogant in the face of Gareth's warnings. His relationship with Guenever has obscured his awareness of threats at court. Indeed, Lancelot barely registered Arthur's veiled warnings to him a few weeks previously.



White's emphasis on the fact that Lancelot forgot his sword is both foreboding and suggests what is to follow.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 7

Guenever is waiting for Lancelot at her room. She is aged, but still resplendent. Lancelot enters and begins to brush her hair. Lancelot tells her about Gareth's warnings and Guenever is frightened, she thinks maybe the brothers have forced the king's hand. She thinks she hears someone at the door; Lancelot bars it. They talk about the brothers' hatred for Lancelot. Guenever suddenly pales and leaps up—she tries to force Lancelot from the room realizing Gareth's warning is true.

Lancelot has become arrogant and is blind to Gareth's warnings—although Guenever is not. Lancelot believes Arthur would not betray them, but underestimates Arthur's adherence to justice even above loyalty to his loved ones.



They see the handle of the door move softly upwards. The handle falls back and there is a loud, iron knocking on the door. Agravaine's voice cries: "Open the door, in the King's name." Lancelot realizes he has forgotten his sword and has no armor. He picks up a footstool, winds a black cloak round his right hand to protect it and kisses Guenever good-bye. He puts his shoulder to the door, jerks it open to allow one knight through and quickly slams the door shut again.

Gareth was right and the brothers have trapped Lancelot so they can gather evidence to accuse the lovers of treason.



Lancelot takes the knight's sword from behind, pushes him to the floor, bangs him over the head with the stool and quickly pierces the knight's body with the sword. They lift the visor once he is dead; it is Agravaine. Quickly Guenever dresses Lancelot in Agravaine's armor. The lovers exchange rings and Lancelot promises he will come for her. Lancelot opens the door to reveal a passage crammed with knights.

Lancelot's knightly skills are put to the test and he kills Agravaine. Agravaine's death will only further the hatred and feud between Mordred and Arthur.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 8

It is a week later and the Gawaine clan waits in the justice room. Outside in the courtyard, a pyre is being readied to burn the Queen to death. Mordred is with the brothers, with his arm in a sling. It appears Lancelot killed all the knights outside his bedchamber, apart from Mordred. Quietly, the King enters, looking tired. Mordred is crying because his brothers have been calling him a coward (they think he survived only because he fled). Arthur explains that he had asked Lancelot not to kill his son.

Arthur has been put in a terrible position—because of his new laws, Guenever must be executed after being found guilty of treason. Arthur has worked all his life to promote justice and to ensure it is upheld; yet, he simultaneously hopes that Lancelot will rescue her and by doing so prevent justice from being carried out.



Mordred announces that Lancelot will try and rescue the Queen; Arthur tells him he has made the guard as strong as he can. But Mordred disagrees, saying that Arthur has left off some of his strongest knights. Arthur asks Gareth and Gaheris to join the guard; they refuse to go armed against two people they love, but say they will go unarmed.

Mordred knows that Arthur must abide by his own justice and thus when Mordred says the guard is not strong enough, Arthur must add more guards to show he is not trying to prevent justice from being served. Gareth and Gaheris also believe in and follow Arthur's system of justice, but refuse to actually do violence in defense of a system that is being manipulated to create unnecessary cruelty. In a way, Gareth and Gaheris are the ideals of the knights whom Arthur wished to create with his new order.



Mordred leaves, and Gawaine and Arthur turn to watch the Queen's execution from the window. Arthur hopes that Lancelot will come. The Queen is brought out in a white shift; they pray. Suddenly there is a loud bugle and the court is filled with the charge of many cavalymen. It is Lancelot! He fights his way to the Queen, takes her from the podium and flees with her on his horse.

Lancelot, as both Arthur and Gawaine had prayed, does rescue Guenever. However, because of the number of guards Arthur had placed around Guenever to prevent her being rescued, many are killed.



Arthur and Gawaine embrace and then call the page for some wine to celebrate. Mordred, unarmed and ghostly, enters the room. He says that it is carnage, and that Gareth and Gaheris are among those slain by Lancelot. They refuse to believe it—Lancelot loved Gareth and besides he would never slay two knights who were unarmed. Gawaine stumbles away, sobbing, to see if it is true. He returns crying "It is true!" and falls at Arthur's feet.

The deaths of Gareth and Gaheris are tragic and immensely divisive. They were unarmed—under knightly law, it is unheard of to slay a knight unarmed. Yet Lancelot—who is Arthur's best knight and who supports Arthur's ideas—has slain them both. Their deaths are deeply ironic and herald the beginning of the Round Table's collapse.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 9

Six months have passed. It is a winter's day at Joyous Guard (Lancelot's castle) and Lancelot and Guenever are standing in the Great Hall. They have been under siege for months now. The two are discussing how Lancelot killed Gaheris and Gareth; he still cannot understand how he could have done it. Lancelot now has to fight the King, his best friend—all because of Gawaine's grief and Mordred's wicked refusal to allow Lancelot to atone for his mistake. The pair considers what they can do, if perhaps there is a way for the two to atone and make it up with Arthur. Guenever suggests that they atone to the Pope—and ask him for forgiveness. If the Pope grants them forgiveness, the whole kingdom will have to obey it.

Lancelot and Guenever—and Arthur along with them—are trapped. The pair are literally being laid siege to in a castle, but this literal entrapment is representative of their current plight. They have been found guilty of treason and thus if they return to Arthur he will have to execute them; and, moreover, Lancelot has killed Gareth and Gaheris and so the Orkney clan will never allow peace while Lancelot is alive. That Lancelot can't understand how he could have killed Gareth and Gaheris highlights the depth of his love for Guenever—he was focused solely on rescuing her and nothing else—and the blindness that love casts over him and, therefore, its destructive power. Just as the lovers are trapped, Arthur has found himself in an inescapable situation where he must uphold justice, yet if he does, he must kill Lancelot and Guenever.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 10

Months later, Gawaine and Mordred sit in the justice room. They are both dressed in black—the uniform of Mordred's gathering political party. There are now thousands of his supporters, all over the country, sharing his convoluted nationalism. They are talking about the unfairness of the pope's forgiveness and about the pageant taking place to grant forgiveness to Lancelot and Guenever.

Although the problem of the lovers seems to have been resolved for Arthur, there is a gathering threat White alludes to: Mordred's growing political party. He has taken Agravaire's advice to heart and begun to forge a nationalistic movement to help him usurp the King.



The pageant reaches the justice room. The king, tired and somber, enters at the end of the processions. Finally, Lancelot and Guenever enter at their cue: they are dressed in white cloth and the Queen carries an olive branch. She looks ungraceful, now that she is no longer young or lovely. The ceremony to forgive the two proceeds, but Gawaine and Mordred refuse to accept their apologies. Finally, the King grants Guenever forgiveness and Lancelot exile to France.

This whole decadent pageant for forgiveness appears both contrived and darkly comedic: both Lancelot and Guenever look ridiculous in their outfits, while Arthur's official forgiveness of them is marred by Mordred's snide comments about their guilt.



Lancelot has fifteen days to leave the kingdom. He walks all the way to Dover, from where he will depart. He walks unclothed, unshod and carrying a cross. He will walk steadily, without haste, all the while Gawaine and his men skulk at his heels, waiting for revenge.

In his penance, Lancelot re-assumes his stately, pious figure that was taken away from him with the farcical pageant. Gawaine, meanwhile, has given in to his brutal nature. His brother's deaths have pushed him into a blind desire for revenge (not that different than Lancelot's blind love for Guenever).



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 11

Guenever is in the Queen's chamber at the Carlisle Court. It is winter, cold and lonely. The King is away in France with the Army, laying siege to Lancelot. She talks with her lady Agnes about the King's sense of justice and Gawaine's grief that drives him to pursue Lancelot. Agnes talks about Mordred, about how he scares her and she does not trust him now that he has been named Lord Protector of the realm. Agnes says he is always watching—he could even be listening now!

Despite everything that has happened to her, and the fact that her husband is laying siege to her lover, Guenever is extremely calm and understanding. She recognizes Arthur's need to see justice done and even justifies Gawaine's maddening grief. In this, White shows us a matured Guenever—one who accepts the events around her and see the justice.



Guenever drops her needle; she fears Agnes is right and bid her open the door. Agnes does so and swings back the door to reveal Mordred's glittering face. Anybody who had not seen Mordred for a month or two would know that he had gone mad—but Guenever, seeing the slow disintegration of his mind daily, has not noticed.

It is useful to draw comparisons between Mordred and some of the early 20th century dictators who drove WWII—it is unlikely White was writing Mordred as any specific one, but the presentation of a mad, yet intelligent leader who can motivate hundreds of people to fight for his cause is poignant.



The two talk; Mordred with a series of veiled threats that Guenever counters with plain aggression. He tries to call her by her pet name "Jenny." Mordred, in his sly manner, tells her that he is going to make an announcement: that Arthur has been killed in battle (although he has not) and then crown himself king. Then, to finish off the beautiful symmetry of history, he will marry Guenever. Guenever suddenly recognizes how powerless she is.

We see now how truly mad Mordred is—he must know that Arthur will not let this happen and will come back to reclaim his throne. His ideas are no longer logical but simply perverse and wicked—his personal desire for revenge is now stepping out from behind the mask of the larger false reason that Agravaire had suggested he erect.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 12

It is dark in Gawaine's tent. He is lying facedown and crying in pain while Arthur strokes his head. He has been injured twice now by Lancelot in battle. They talk about England, about what it will be like to return home. The Bishop of Rochester enters, bearing a long letter for the King. He reads it and turns deadly pale. Rochester and Gawaine stop their prattle and ask Arthur what has happened. He tells them that Mordred has announced that Arthur is dead and proclaimed himself King of England. Mordred is also going to marry Guenever. Guenever accepted his proposal and then barricaded herself in the Tower of London, but managed to slip a letter out. Mordred is now laying siege to her with cannons. Gawaine and Arthur decide they must hurry home and lay to rest the feud with Lancelot.

Sir Gawaine has also matured since he was a young knight who could not control his temper. His grief for his brothers is strong, but we also see how he has been the victim of Mordred's manipulations. Upon hearing the news about Mordred, both Arthur and Gawaine realize they must immediately end their feud with Lancelot—seeing, now, Mordred's madness exposed.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 13

In Lancelot's castle, men sit around a bright fire. They are confused as to why the siege was lifted so quickly. They wonder if the King is ill, or if there has been a revolt in England. Lancelot enters suddenly, shouting for his men and carrying a letter. The letter has come ashore from England but was delayed by a storm. It was written by Gawaine—the first letter he had written in year. The letters explains Mordred's treason, about Guenever barricaded in the tower, and that the King has landed at Dover and won the first battle against Mordred. The letter is from Gawaine, but Gawaine says that by the time the letter reaches Lancelot he will be dead. He writes to give his forgiveness to Lancelot and to ask his forgiveness for his own siege. He writes that he is close to death from his wounds in battle. He urges Lancelot to travel with haste to help the King.

The letter Gawaine writes to Lancelot is deeply poignant. It exposes a side to Gawaine we have not previously seen. Throughout the novel, he is a vulgar, barbaric knight who cannot truly grasp Arthur's concepts of good and justice. But his letter reveals a somewhat childlike understanding of things and a sensitive and truly repentant knight.



BOOK 4, CHAPTER 14

A wind of sorrow whistles around the King's battle pavilion. It is late and his head is bowed over his papers. He is tired; he has been broken by the recent two battles. The **Round Table** is now dispersed. He feels that he has failed the service Merlyn trained him for—to conquer Might with Right. He sees now that his whole reign has been based on a premise that is false: that man is decent.

Just as Merlyn foresaw years before, Arthur's attempt to innovate the political system in England has failed. Arthur thinks it is because of the false ideal Merlyn instilled in him—that man is ultimately good. This idea is the opposite of what the bible teaches and exposes Arthur's ultimate humanity.



He thinks now how his whole life has been an attempt to plug a raging flood, only to have it break through in places he has overlooked. The King realizes the Bible is right in saying the heart of man is deceitful over all things. His mind circles back over the same things: Why do men fight?

White's novel is a discordant one: most of the book describes questing, warfare, killing, jousting etc. Yet, it simultaneously preaches pacifism: Arthur's ultimate goal is to stop all forms of violence. He fails in his goal, though, because ultimately man is flawed.



He thinks about the problem of having; how some men have and others do not. About if all men were equal, there would be no need for war. Or perhaps wars happen because of fear, fear of the other, of your neighbor who you do not trust.

Arthur's mind dwells on the possible reasons for war: inequality, xenophobia etc. Yet having so many different reasons for war suggests that perhaps there is no reason for war, that perhaps the reason men fight is no different than the reason ants fight—because they can.



A page enters and Arthur asks his name—he is Tom of Warwick. Arthur asks him not to fight in the battle tomorrow, but to ride home instead and take Arthur's Idea with him so that it will last. Arthur tells him the story of the table's creation and of his attempt to bring justice to England. The page says he will leave and tell everyone of this ancient idea. Arthur then knights the boy and tells him to rise: Sir Thomas of Warwick.

Arthur sleeps and dreams of Merlyn. When he wakes he begins to remember: Lyo-Lyok and the birds migrating; the belligerent ants; the badger. He suddenly sees the problem plain before him. War is fought about nothing, literally nothing; it is based upon imaginary lines on a map. Nations are simply that and their feuds are about lines that do not exist. If only the imaginary lines on the earth's surface could be unimagined.

The King feels refreshed and clear-headed. He is ready to reform the table and bring his new idea. But it is too late for him. It is his destiny now to die; Guenever's to take the veil; and Mordred to be slain. The cannons begin to thunder and the King of England draws himself up to meet the future with a peaceful heart.

Sir Thomas of Warwick is in fact Sir Thomas Malory of Warwickshire—the believed author of "Le Morte d'Arthur" on which T.H. White's book is based. By introducing Malory here as a young page, told the story by Arthur himself, White creates a way for Arthur to pass on his ideals even as they die away—through writing, a legacy that will pass down to White's own novel. In this way White subverts the tradition of the Arthurian myth (which has always glorified war and fantasies of English nationalism) to rather be one that argues against both of those ideas and instead focuses on pacifism and a desire to eliminate nationalism.

Throughout his lifetime, Arthur barely thinks about the times he was changed into animals by Merlyn. However here, on his deathbed, Arthur remembers all of the animal friends he had made and what they had taught him. He suddenly understands that if man were able to dismantle all the divisions between nations, there would be no reason for war.



Although Arthur suddenly understands why men commit violence, he will never get to act upon it because he will die this day in battle—he will die in violence. The story ends with him at peace for having realized the answer to the questions he has been asking, and yet failing to put those answers into any sort of practice. The ideal Arthur realizes once again seems to be out of reach of men in the real world, just as the grail was, though there is also a hopeful cast to Arthur's thoughts and to the ending of the book, as if perhaps both Arthur and White hope that their message and ideas might still be taken up at some point in the future.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Hopkinson, Sarah. "The Once and Future King." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Dec 2013. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Hopkinson, Sarah. "The Once and Future King." LitCharts LLC, December 18, 2013. Retrieved April 21, 2020.
<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-once-and-future-king>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Once and Future King* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

White, T. H.. *The Once and Future King*. Ace Books. 1987.

CHICAGO MANUAL

White, T. H.. *The Once and Future King*. New York: Ace Books. 1987.