Once And Future King Essay, Research Paper

In The Once and Future King T.H. White conveys his personal thoughts on leadership through the help of Merlin, and Wart’s transformations. Through each transformation Wart experiences different forms of power, each being a part of a whole idea on how a leader should act. He must piece together these ideas for the definitive way he should rule as king. In order to teach Wart, Merlin transforms him into several different forms, a fish, hawk, ant, goose and a badger.

” I wish I was a fish,’ said the Wart.” (p.45) At that, Wart’s first transformation plunged him and Merlin into the castle’s moat. They proceeded to meet the largest fish in the moat, who is the ruler. This fish took what he wanted because of his size. In a speech about power, he told Wart “Might is right,” and might of the body is greater than might of the mind. Because of the way the fish-king ruled, his subjects obeyed him out of fear for their lives. Wart experienced this firsthand when the fish-king told him to leave. He had grown bored of Wart, and if Wart didn’t leave he would’ve eaten him. The king used his size as his claim to power, therefore his subjects followed him out of fear.

In Wart’s next transformation into a hawk he soared into the castle’s mews. All the birds in the mews had a military rank. Their leader was an old falcon, who was kept for show. The birds who ranked below the falcon, held her in highest regard because of her age. She applied her power over the other birds with no concern for their lives. In one instance, Wart is ordered to stand next to the cage of a crazy hawk who almost killed him. On the other hand, her age brought respect. The falcon was much older than the others because she had not been released once she outlived her usefulness as a huntress. Her age and attitude allowed her to maintain a powerful grip over all the birds she ruled through fear and respect.

Next, Wart was transformed into an ant and posted within an ant colony. There was a single leader of the ants, and she was the only thinking individually in the whole nest. All the ants were manipulated and overseen by her. Each ant had a specific task, which it completes repeatedly. The absolute power exerted by the leader destroys all individualism, leaving the ants with no creativity. Instead, they used trial and error to complete tasks that should take only a small amount of thought. Wart saw this occur when an ant tried with difficulty to organize three cadavers in a small burial chamber. ” The new ant put down the cadaver vaguely and began dragging the other two in various directions. It did not seem to know where to put them. Or rather, it knew that a certain arrangement had to be made, but it could not figure out how to make it. It was like a man with a tea-cup in one hand and a sandwich in the other, who wants to light a cigarette with a match.” (p.123) A small amount of reasoning would have solved the problem easily and quickly. The ants were of a collective mind, so what one thought, they all thought. They went about their daily lives oblivious to the control the leader had over them.

Wart’s fourth transformation placed him in a flock of geese. These geese were a peace loving race that never killed. There was one leader to a group who was called The Admiral. He guided them on their flight south for the winter. The Admiral received his position because of his knowledge of the southern migration route. He was only elected if all the geese in the migration group agreed he was capable of doing the job. During the flight the geese obeyed his choices, since he was their elected leader. But his power ended once they were back on the ground, where he is only looked upon as a respected elder.

In the final transformation Wart visited the badger. The badger was a great philosopher who enjoyed giving scholarly commentaries. While Wart was visiting him, the badger explained a story he had written on the creation of the animal kingdom’s hierarchy. In his commentary he explained how man answered God’s riddle and is awarded control over the animal kingdom. He lived a life of solitude because many other animals did not think at his level. They listened and respected him because he was an experienced wise scholar.

Through each of his transformations Wart saw different types and uses of power. Wart must choose how he will eventually govern his kingdom. The leaders he visited ruled in their own way and each retained and exercised their power through different methods. When these are combined, the following picture of how a leader should or should not rule emerges: A leader should not attempt to rule his or her people through might and fear, as did the fish-king. Unlike the falcon, a ruler should not retain power only because of age, and should rule with the subjects well-being in mind. The ants revealed that one should not exert total control over one’s subjects because they lose creativity and individualism. The geese demonstrated the positive merit of a democratically elected leader, whose subjects have faith in his ability to get a job done, and who has the required skills to complete the task at hand. Leaders must give great thought to making decisions related to their use of power, and use their experience, like the Badger. T. H. White brought forth this image of a “good” leader using all of Wart’s transformations as hosts to his personal thoughts and opinions.