Synopsis For The Once And Future King Essay, Research Paper

THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

By T. H. White

(1958) The Once and Future King is the collective volume of works, loosley based on

Sir Thomas Malory s Morte d Arthur (c.1469), which includes The Sword in the Stone,

The Queen of Air and Darkness (formerly The Witch in the Wood), The Ill-Made

Knight, and The Candle in the Wind. It is probably the most famous and popular of T. H.

White’s books.

A brief synopsis

by Tia Nevitt

The Sword in the Stone, is about Arthur’s childhood. He is not called Arthur at this point,

but The Wart, a name bestowed on him by his foster brother, Kay. The Wart lives in Sir

Ector’s castle in the Forest Savauge. Of the five books, this one is the one most suitable

for children. An early adventure in the book is about how the Wart found Merlyn. Merlyn

becomes the boys’ tutor, and the Wart is sent on many strange adventures when he is

turned into various animals. The book ends just after the Wart pulls the sword from the

stone, and becomes Arthur, King of England.

Right away, he must go to war to defend his claim. Among his aggressors is Lot, King of

the Orkney Isles. The second book, The Queen of Air and Darkness, is primarily

concerned with the lives of Lot’s young sons, and his wife Morgause. The sons love their

mother, even though they know she is evil, and this causes many problems later in the

book.

The third book, The Ill-Made Knight is about Lancelot. Of all the different renditions of

the Arthurian legends, I like White’s rendering of Lancelot the best. Although he is the

greatest knight in the world, he is cursed with a freakishly ugly face. White makes it clear

that he looks like an ape. I wish the producers of the movie version of the musical

Camelot, which is based on this book, had the courage to present Lancelot as he is

presented in this book.

Lancelot has a lot of problems which he attempts, not very successfully, to resolve. His

biggest problem is Guenever, Arthur’s young wife. They fall in love, and they try very

hard not to admit it to themselves at first. He also must deal with his fragile psyche, and

he goes mad two or three times. However, before the end of the book, his greatest wish

comes true.

The focus of the story switches back to Arthur for The Candle in the Wind. His past

comes back to haunt him as his bastard son, Mordred, comes to Camelot and stirs up all

kinds of trouble. He plots Arthur’s downfall, and does so by using the still-unresolved

love triangle between Arthur, Lancelot and Guenever. There is a war that no one wants

except Mordred. The end of this book is at the eve of the war, and here is where the

volume, The Once and Future King, comes to an end.

A fifth book, The Book of Merlyn, is sold as a separate volume. In this book, Arthur is

revisited by Merlyn and the Badger, one of the animals that the Wart had met during his

childhood, the geese, and other animals.

Tia Nevitt, 1996 (tianna@getnet.com)

T. H. White s Twist on a Timeless Tale

T. H. White’s The Once and Future King is one of the most complete and unique

portrayals of the immortal legend of King Arthur. Though it has been in print for less than

half a century, it has already been declared a classic by many, and is often referred to as

the “bible” of Arthurian legend. White recreates the epic saga of King Arthur, from his

childhood education and experiences until his very death, in a truly insightful and new

way. This is not, however, the first complete novel of Arthur’s life. In the fifteenth

century, Sir Thomas Malory wrote Morte d’Arthur, the first complete tale of Arthur’s life.

Since then, a countless number of books have been written on the subject, yet none can

compare to The Once and Future King. It has easily become the most popular of all the

Arthurian novels as it is loved by both children and adults. Though similar in many ways

to other works of the same subject, such as Malory’s, White gives new details, meanings,

and insightful modernization to the story, giving it an earthy quality which the reader can

identify with. White’s rendering of the Arthurian legend differs from the traditional

versions in that he includes contemporary knowledge and concepts, adds new stories and

characters to the legend, and provides new perspectives by probing deeper into the

existing tales.

Anachronism

It is the contemporary tone in The Once and Future King, which gives the novel its

present-day feeling. This helps the reader to relate to the story, rather than placing it in

strictly within the context of the Arthurian period. For example, early in the novel Eton

College is referred to, which White then points out “was not founded until 1440,” but the

place was nevertheless “of the same sort”(4). Another example of anachronism can be

found during a discussion between Merlyn and Wart, when Merlyn exclaims “Castor and

Pollux blow me to Bermuda!” (86). During the days of Arthur, Bermuda was an unknown

place, and would not be discovered until the fifteenth century. Though these references

have no true significance to the plot of the story, White uses anachronism as a device to

aid the reader in association with the context. And, as in other of White’s novels, “the

author’s presence is apparent” (Fries 260), giving the feeling of an oral storytelling. These

“almost too frequent historical tangents are designed to underline the anachronism of the

teller” (Fries 260).

White also uses anachronism to convey a more penetrating idea; relating the life of Arthur

to modern society. White’s novel constitutes his search for answers to the problems of the

modern world. When Merlyn and Wart are discussing knighthood, Wart expresses his

desire to “encounter all the evil in the world… so that if I conquered there would be none

left.” Merlyn then insightfully replies that “that would be extremely presumptuous”, and

he “would be conquered for it” (184). In this, White is conveying the notion that society

cannot be governed by might alone. Stephen Dunn exposes the concept that “White’s

world… is still the world as we, unfortunately, know it” (367). This is made evident by

Merlyn’s relations of contemporary British fox hunting to medieval war. Merlyn educates

Wart to expose him to faults present in society so that he may correct them when he

becomes king. These faults are still present in today’s society, which is precisely the point

White is making.

T. H. White also conquers the task of avoiding a monotonous recreation of the Arthurian

legend by adding new and unique characters and stories in his novel. The addition of

King Pellinore for example is unique to The Once and Future King. When White first

introduces Pellinore, he is fumbling with his glasses, falls “off his horse to search for

them… visor shutting in the process, and exclaimed ‘Oh, dear!’” (16). Pellinore appears

throughout the novel at the traditional medieval events and plays a key role in Wart’s

education. Sirol Hugh-Jones credits White with saying that he has “developed a love

affair with King Pellinore the only addition to Malory” (ix). White creates the character

of King Pellinore to exhibit the farce of medieval custom, much as Miguel de Cervantes

does with Don Quixote, as well as creating comic relief. White tries to eliminate the

problem of strict reverence by adding characters such as Pellinore.

In addition to new characters, White adds new adventures as well. In Arthurian novels of

the past, Wart’s education was not a prominent event. However, as C. M. Adderly writes

that “education is the theme which most clearly gives The Once and Future King its

structure” (55). Wart’s education gives White’s novel an overlay in theme of the

advancement of the human nature. Merlyn tells Wart that “the best thing for being sad is

to learn something” (185).

“The best thing for being sad,” replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow,

“is to learn something. That’s the only thing that never fails. You may grow

old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to

the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the

world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled

in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then to learn.

Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the

mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or

distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you.

Look what a lot of things there are to learn.”

White puts a great deal of emphasis on the education of Wart because it is through this

that the character of Arthur, along with his personality, morals, and virtue are defined.

This stress of education in The Once and Future King is unique, and sets it apart from the

traditional Arthurian legend.

The Once and Future King also varies from the traditional tale by probing deeper into the

story, beyond the tradition, adding new perspectives and outlooks. Before, the legend of

King Arthur was told more as a fairy tale. J. R. Cameron writes that “White has not

adopted the stereotypical Middle Ages of most fiction” (447). White uses the Arthurian

legend to illustrate a historical pride of England, as well as a view of the progression of

Aristotelian society. Also, White uses this view to expose faults in contemporary society.

The past stories of Arthur had glorified him almost to the point of making him immortal.

But White, when telling of the death of Arthur, writes that the “fate of this man… was less

than a drop, although it was a sparkling one, in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea”

(677). White sees that the Arthurian legend is not so much the glorification of one man,

but the basis and backbone of an entire country.

White also redevelops and expands the characters of the Arthurian legend, giving the

novel more consistency and allowing his readers to relate to these characters. White

exposes the emotions and personalities of his characters, rather than just telling of their

actions. White displays the characters’ emotions and feelings in order for them “to be

acceptable to the twentieth century reader” (Cameron 447). After Wart pulls the sword

from the anvil in the churchyard, making him the king of England, he is regarded with

much reverence by his companions and even his family. Observing this, he declares “Oh,

dear, I wish I had never seen that filthy sword at all.” After this “the Wart also burst into

tears” (210). White shows the emotions and feelings of Wart and gives a sense of reality

to this character. J. R. Cameron writes that “Malory made no attempt to analyze the

characters; Tennyson robbed his characters of most of their reality” (447). White,

however, gave much depth and realness to his characters, setting The Once and Future

King apart from other versions of the Arthurian legend.

Humor

Another important addition by White to the legend of Arthur is that of humor. The

Arthurian legend has been told with so much reverence and importance for many

centuries. White, however, adds humor to the story, giving his novel versatility. Stephen

Dunn writes that “White said… that humor was put in to make the moral and

philosophical pill which, in all conscience, is a fairly bitter one slide down more

easily” (365). White writes of the confrontation between King Pellinore and Sir

Grummore Grummersom in an extremely humorous manner. During the course of their

duel, the two constantly argue and bicker like children, “[They stood] opposite each other

for about half an hour, and walloped each other on the helm” (63). Through this, White

exposes the humor in chivalric life and gives the story a comedic quality.

White also utilizes humor in the characterization of Merlyn. Merlyn, who is regarded in

the novel as a very wise and intelligent person, is introduced as a disorganized,

short-tempered old man. When Wart first encounters Merlyn, the great magician tries to

conjure up a pencil and piece of paper, and humorously fails repeatedly. As a result of his

frustration, he flies “into a passion in which he said by-our-lady quite often” (28). This

depiction of Merlyn shows his amusing and funny personality, which White exposes

throughout the novel. The frequent use of comedy gives White’s novel a unique twist

which cannot be found in the traditional versions of the story.

When T. H. White decided to write The Once and Future King, he realized that his task

would be an ambitious one. He faced the challenge of telling a tale which has been

present for centuries, in a new way which would make it of interest to readers. His

recreation of the Arthurian legend more than lives up to that challenge. The addition of

new themes, anachronism, characters such as King Pellinore, and new adventures gives

the novel a unique flair without straying too far from the traditional legend. The deeper

interpretations of the characters and events in the story provide for a truth and authenticity

not to be found in similar works, and the sense of humor gives White’s novel an

individual touch. T. H. White’s The Once and Future King is one of the best retellings of

the Arthurian legend, and his additions to the tale create an invigorating and entertaining

combination, ranking it among the most popular and best read of all.

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A Note on the Thesis of T. H. White s The Once and

Future King

To answer the question of the thesis of The Once and Future King is indeed complicated.

I feel that “The Matter of Britian” (which is indeed the central legend of the western

world) encompasses the human condition. The Arthur Legend deals with love, loyalty,

idealism, war, peace, prosperity, perfection, and the ultimate in good vs. evil. White deals

with all of the above. I can, of course, speak more authoritatively on The Sword in the

Stone as that is the book I’ve spent so much time studying of the tetrology.

There is no question that White feels an academic education is far superior to an athletic

education. Time and again he makes the point that “education is experience and the

essence of education is self-reliance.” Wart’s experience with the animals/birds/fish teach

him that knowledge is power. I [agree with] the comment that schools have been forced

to lower their standards in order to accomodate athletics. White also commented that

schools promote the lazy and idle along with the industrious. He definitely feels

education is extremely important. Education is one of the themes of the book.

Being the pacifist that he was and writing during WWII, White makes the point

repeatedly that violence/agression is not the answer to life’s trials. Wart’s whole education

by Merlyn (White) is directed towards a sensitivity to life and a respect for it. White

illustrates this through the various governments Wart experiences

totalitarianism/Fascism (the ants), feudalism (Sir Ector), and total freedom/almost

anarchy (the geese). Again, White states that it doesn’t matter what government is in

place, what truly matters is the kind of leader. As long as those in control are good and

moral then the people will prosper. In The Queen of Air and Darkness he makes the point

again that agression is not the answer when he compares Hitler (the Austrian who

imposed his will on the world) to Jesus Christ (the philosopher who made his ideas

available).

Another point White makes that I love is when he has Merlyn tell Arthur the parable of

Elijah and the Rabbi Jachanan. Life is not fair. What may be good for one person

certainly could be disastrous for another. Kay is a great foil for Wart. By showing Kay’s

weaknesses, Wart’s strengths are emphasized.

White even states that the Arthur legend is an Aristotelian tragedy. Arthur is a tragic hero.

He does bring his own destruction upon himself because he transgresses Mordred is

born. Morality and immorality is part and parcel of the human condition dealt with in the

legend. I love White’s ending of the book when he sends “Tom” (of course, a reference to

Thomas Malory) running from the final battle field so people would know of the short

time when people lived free from fear and mayhem “the golden days of Camelot.” To

quote the song, “for one brief moment” there was a Camelot.

Ruth Barker, 23 January 1997

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A further note on the time-period and anachronisms in

T. H. White s The Once and Future King

The action in TOAFK takes place between the beginning of the thirteenth century and the

end of the fifteenth: from about 1200 until possibly 1485. While the young Arthur is at

the Castle Sauvage, Sir Ector receives a letter from Uther Pendragon dated “12 Uther.”

At this time, Arthur and Kay are probably about twelve years old: they have been on an

adventure with Robin Hood, are old enough to resent the attentions of the Old Nurse, and

still delight in throwing snowballs; the possibility is that Arthur’s birthdate is about the

same year as Uther’s ascension to the throne. When Uther’s death is announced, King

Pellinore comments, “Uther the Conqueror, 1066 to 1216.” This would seem to be about

four years later than the time when Sir Ector receives Uther’s letter, and would make

Arthur’s age around sixteen, roughly in coincidence with the traditional age of fifteen.

White’s forward limit of the fifteenth century is reached in memorable fashion when the

Bishop of Rochester expresses horror at the thought of Mordred using cannon against his

father, and King Arthur speaks to his page “Tom of Newbold Revell.” Set against the

actual events of these centuries, Uther (who is portrayed as a Norman) by virtue of his

appellation “the Conqueror” and the date of 1066 for his birth is made to be a kind of

William the Conqueror (Norman, 1066-1087). The remaining years of Uther’s reign seem

to cover the actual reigns of William II (William Rufus, Norman, 1087-1100), Henry I

(Norman, 1100-1135), Stephen (Norman, 1135-1154), Henry II (Plantagenet, 1154-1189),

Richard I (Plantagenet, 1189-1199), and John (Plantagenet, 1199-1216).

The condition of England when Arthur ascends to the throne is pretty much in keeping

with the way it was when John the Bad died: “Look at the barns burnt,” Merlyn tells the

Wart, and dead men’s legs sticking out of ponds, and horses with swelled bellies by the

roadside, and mills falling down, and money buried, and nobody daring to walk abroad

with gold or ornaments on their clothes. That is chivalry nowadays. That is the Uther

Pendragon touch.

This picture of England in chaos before Arthur is recalled later in terrifying detail: “When

the old King came to the throne it had been an England of armoured barons, and of

famine, and of war. It had been the country of trial by red-hot irons . . .”

For practical purposes, however, White’s idealized time is given the name of the twelfth

century: ” . . . If you happen to live in the twelfth century, or whenever it was,” he writes

in one place, and in another, “The Battle of Bedegraine was the . . . twelfth century

equivalent of total war.” Further, some of the events which he depicts as taking place in

Arthur’s reign occurred during the years 1066-1216: the evolution of legal writs and an

elementary form of trial by jury came about under the vigorous rule of Henry II;

Mordred’s ambition to massacre the Jews was systematically practiced under Richard I,

with the Jewish quarter of London being destroyed in 1215 under John. On the other

hand, the extravagance of dress which White describes when Arthur’s court “goes

modern” fits in well with the sumptuous costumes evolved under Edward III and Richard

II.

The Gramarye of this idealized century was inhabited by Normans (Galls), who had come

over with Uther, by Saxons, and by Old Ones (Gaels). The Normans, of whom Arthur is

one, comprise the chivalric aristocracy who with their Games-Mania and ritualized forms

of warfare act like fox-hunting squires of the nineteenth century.

By their unthinking brutality under Uther, the Norman/Galls have oppressed the

Saxons,who actually have preceded them in England, and have kept them as serfs in the

posture of a subject race (” Baron had been the equivalent of the modern word

Sahib! “). The Old Ones “Gaels” or Celts who were in England centuries before

either the Normans or the Saxons, have been harried to Wales, Cornwall, Scotland,

Ireland and Brittany. Merlyn gives Arthur a history lesson: “About three thousand years

ago,” he said,

“the country you are riding through belonged to a Gaelic race who fought with

copper hatchets. Two thousand years ago they were hunted west by another Gaelic

race with bronze swords. A thousand years ago there was a Teuton invasion by

people who had iron weapons, but it didn’t reach the whole of the Pictish Isles

because the Romans arrived in the middle and got mixed up with it. The Romans

went away about eight hundred years ago, and then another Teuton invasion of

people mainly called Saxons drove the whole rag-bag west as usual. Tlle

Saxons were just beginning to settle down when your father the Conqueror arrived

with his pack of Normans, and that is where we are today. Robin Wood was a

Saxon partizan.”

The general viewpoint of an idealized twelfth century imagined in the fifteenth is greatly

accentuated by White’s many references to actual kings as “legendary.” It is Arthur’s

destiny, with a nudge from Merlyn, to try to right the hideous legacy left by his father

Uther by quelling Force Majeure, or Fort Mayne, by replacing the philosophy of Might as

Right by a rudimentary justice which will take its most tragic significance when Arthur

explains to Guenever and Lancelot that if Mordred accuses them of treachery he, the king,

under his new code, will be unable to intercede in their behalf.

Into Arthur’s lifetime-from his idyllic childhood in the Castle Sauvage, his union with

Morgause, his marriage to Guenever, his mounting of the Grail Quest, and all the events

leading up to the final tragedy-White has compressed much of the actual history of almost

three hundred years, the centuries of the High Middle Ages. White’s technique is

beautifully visualized by Shakespeare in Henry V (a play which White himself said he

detested):

For ’tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings, Carrying them here and there,

jumping o’er times, Turning th’ accomplishment of many years Into an hourglass .

. . (Henry V, Pro. Q1.28-31.)

The figure of Merlyn stands independent of White’s time-scheme. He has been born in the

future (”the only way to get second sight”) and is living backwards. His recollection goes

“back” to at least the mid nineteen-thirties, for he criticizes Arthur’s enthusiasm for war

with reference to Hitler. Through the brilliant device of Merlyn, White is able to make

use of ironic and humorous historical insights from the fifteenth through the

mid-twentieth century.

Anachronisms

TOAFK is full of anachronisms, allusions, and personal recollection. By envisioning for

Arthur’s story an idealized century imagined from Malory’s fifteenth century, White was

opening the door wide for all kinds of anachronisms. However, if one thinks of the time

scheme of TOAFK Arthur’s story as a kind of portmanteau into which is packed the

trappings of nearly three centuries of history between 1216 and 1485, then the concept is

easier to deal with. By a sort of accordion process the low points are dropped from

consideration, and the high points are made to seem closer together:

In the smoky vaults, where once the grubby barons had gnawed their bones with

bloody fingers, now there were people eating with clean fingers, which they had

washed with herb-scented toilet soap out of wooden bowls.

This sort of advance in table manners took much longer indeed than the few years of

Arthur’s reign and yet by compressing those years into “an hourglass” White succeeds

in his effort to picture Arthur as civilization’s champion. Besides, washing hands before

meals is pretty frequently mentioned in the High Middle Ages; with Arthur living

1216-1485, there’s plenty of time for the custom to take root! A glance at White’s Malory

essay in his journals reveals immediately the sensitivity which White showed to both

what he believed Malory to be doing and what he himself was planning to do to Malory.

In the event, of course, White did indeed follow his careful plan about anachronisms in

many places: in the descriptive passages about castles (Sir Ector’s, pp. 36-38; Morgause’s,

pp. 280-81; Lancelot’s, pp. 621-22), each of which is built in the architectural style of a

different century, and in the splendid panoramas of medieval life (pp. 442-47; 539-49;

559-569) which comprehends centuries of history. White usually stays within the

1216-1485 limits, but he occasionally drops back to take advantage of the years

1066-1216, or even earlier: the description of the Out Isles is one exception of this kind.

But in retrospect it is not the glory of these scenes which captures the imagination. Rather

it is the riotous mishmash of Merlyn’s backward thinking, and his beagling trousers, his

walking mustard-pot, Sir Ector’s gruff nineteenth-century colloquialisms and Palomides’s

Babu English that hold one’s heart in thrall.

Kurth Sprague, 26 December 1996

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