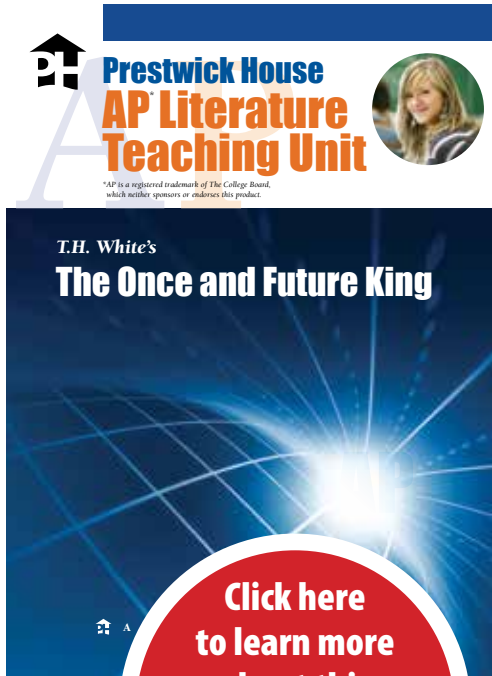




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Teaching Unit

The Once and Future King

by T. H. White

written by Jill Clare



Prestwick House

Item No. 309061

The Once and Future King

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain the elements of tragedy and explain how the text can be regarded as a tragedy.
2. analyze the text for evidence of foreshadowing and explain how foreshadowing contributes to the tone of the work.
3. analyze the text for thematic development and explain how specific themes contribute to the overall meaning of the text.
4. examine the text for both historical and fantastic elements and analyze how the interplay between the two affects the tone and meaning of the text.
5. identify satire and irony in the text and explain how these techniques contribute to the meaning of the work.
6. identify motifs presented in the text and explain how they contribute to character and thematic development.
7. trace character development throughout the novel and analyze how this development helps build meaning.
8. examine the role and presentation of women in the text and discuss how their characterization contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.
9. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.

Introductory Lecture

I. Arthurian mythology

T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* is not an original tale. Instead, it is a retelling of the King Arthur legend, drawn from many sources, most notably Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which itself is a compendium of many sources.

A. THOMAS MALORY

Thomas Malory's pivotal work, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (commonly translated as *The Death of Arthur*), was compiled from many versions of the King Arthur legend, both written and spoken. Published in 1485, Malory's work was written in a late form of Middle English. This work contains many elements and characters that students will have become familiar with after reading *The Once and Future King*, from the knights of King Arthur's court, to Guenever and Lancelot's romance, to Merlyn's magic, to the ultimate downfall of Arthur's kingdom. Like White's work, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* is divided into books, separating the major parts of the story.

A summarization of Malory's work is entirely unnecessary in understanding the tale told in *The Once and Future King*. Nonetheless, White makes fairly frequent references to Malory as he tells his own tale, sometimes even instructing readers to read Malory's version of the tale for more detail. In chapter 28 of book three, the narrator speaks directly to his readers, saying, "If you want to read about the beginning of the Quest for the Grail, about the wonders of Galahad's arrival ... and of the last supper at court ... if you want to read about these, you must seek them in Malory. That way of telling the story can only be done once."

Occasionally, when the narrator mentions Malory, it is not to entice the reader to read his earlier work, but to cast a certain doubt on Malory's estimation of certain characters or facts. For example, in chapter three of *The Candle in the Wind*, White writes, "For the King, or at least this is how Malory interprets him, was the patron saint of chivalry." The parenthetical remark here is quite important. The narrator seems to imply that he has some disagreement with the way Malory interprets the king's character. Self-aware remarks like this one give the novel much richness and interest, and they also remind the reader that Malory's interpretation of King Arthur is just that—an interpretation. The same holds true for T.H. White's interpretation of Arthur. Parenthetical remarks like this one establish King Arthur's story as based in myth as much as it is based in history.

T.H. White, perhaps as an homage to the author whose work he drew from so heavily, includes the character of a young page at the very end of the book. He is introduced as Tom of Newbold Revell near Warwick, and Arthur refers to him as "the light-bringer," entrusting him with the momentous task of carrying Arthur's ideals forward and not letting them be forgotten. Arthur says to Tom, before he dismisses him with his task: "Will you try to remember that you are a kind of vessel to carry on the idea, when things go wrong, and that the whole hope depends on you alive?" As the boy bends down to kiss the king's hand, the author describes his surcoat, "with the Malory bearings," making it clear that this young boy is White's rendition of Sir Thomas Malory.

The Once and Future King

Book One: The Sword in the Stone

Chapter 1

1. How does the disjointed structure of Sir Grummore and Sir Ector’s conversation help to establish their characteristics?

2. In the middle of Sir Grummore and Sir Ector’s conversation, the narrator employs an aside to the reader: “It was not really Eton that he mentioned, for the College of Blessed Mary was not founded until 1440, but it was a place of the same sort. Also they were drinking Metheglyn, not port, but by mentioning the modern wine it is easier to give you the feel.” What does this aside accomplish?

3. What techniques are used in this chapter to help establish the setting for the novel?

4. How are Kay and the Wart different? Describe their relationship.

Chapter 23

1. Near the beginning of the chapter, the narrator writes, “Perhaps, if you happen not to have lived in the Old England of the twelfth century, or whenever it was...” What is the function of the phrase “or whenever it was,” and what tone does it lend to the novel?

2. How does this chapter further develop Kay’s character?

3. How is the pivotal moment, when the Wart pulls the sword from the stone, the culmination of the Wart’s education?

Chapter 9

1. How do the events in this chapter indicate a change in the relationship between Lancelot and Guenever?

2. How have the knights made a fetish of the Round Table, and what theme does this develop?

3. What effect does Arthur's worry about the Orkney faction create?

Chapter 8

1. How does Arthur demonstrate both his commitment to justice and his love for his wife in this chapter?

2. The reader does not see Lancelot rescuing Guenever from her execution; rather, this action is narrated through Arthur and Gawaine’s exclamations as they watch from a window. What effect does this point of view create?

3. How are the deaths of Gareth and Gaheris important to the plot development?
