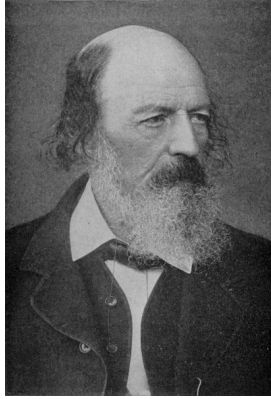


# IDYLLS OF THE KING

by Alfred Lord Tennyson



## THE AUTHOR

Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was born in Lincolnshire, England, the fourth of twelve children of an Anglican rector. After completing grammar school, he was educated at home by his father before entering Trinity College, Cambridge. He cultivated his poetic gifts from an early age, publishing *Poems of Two Brothers* with his brother Charles when he was only 18. At Cambridge, he enjoyed academic success, but was painfully shy. He continued to publish poetry, won a campus poetry prize, and in 1829 was invited to join a group of Cambridge intellectuals called the Apostles. Here he met Arthur Henry Hallam, who quickly became his best friend and eventually was engaged to marry Tennyson's sister. After Tennyson and Hallam returned from a brief trip to Spain in an attempt to assist revolutionaries there, he was forced to leave the university without completing his degree because of the death of his father, which left him with insufficient funds to finish his education.

For years thereafter, Tennyson lived quietly at home, working on his poetry. In 1832 he published a collection of poems that included *The Lady of Shalott*, *The Lotos-Eaters*, and *The Palace of Art*. Because of the uneven quality of the poems in the anthology, however, it was not well-received by critics, and Tennyson gave up his writing for almost a decade. A crisis in Tennyson's life and art occurred in 1833 when Hallam died in Vienna at the age of 22. His shock at the loss of his best friend drove him into a period of deep despair, for which the only remedy was to write. The lyrical poems he wrote over a period of years while reflecting on Hallam's death, as well as questions of God and immortality, were published in 1850 as *In Memoriam*, which is generally considered his finest work.

Tennyson had been betrothed to Emily Sellwood in 1837, but the two had been unable to marry because of his straitened financial circumstances. In the 1840s, however, his reputation as a poet grew as he produced works such as *Morte d'Arthur* and *Locksley Hall*. He was granted a government pension in 1845, and in 1850 was named Poet Laureate, succeeding Wordsworth in the position, allowing him the financial stability to marry Emily after a 13-year engagement. In his official capacity, he wrote poems glorifying the British Empire, including *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1854), about a famous battle during the Crimean War. He became friends with such notable men of the Victorian era as William Gladstone, Thomas Carlyle, and Prince Albert, the royal consort, to whom he dedicated *Idylls of the King*. As a result of his artistic

contributions, he was granted a baronetcy by Queen Victoria in 1883 – the first writer to be so honored solely on the basis of his literary output. He continued to write through the rest of his long life, and died peacefully at his home in 1892 at the age of 83. By the time of his death, Tennyson was the most popular and widely-read poet in England, though critics often accused him of being more concerned with words than he was with ideas – a criticism in which he to some extent concurred. He was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

Tennyson had long had an interest in the Arthurian legend, and wrote many poems on the subject during his long career. In 1885, these were collected in one volume and published as *Idylls of the King*. The tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table had existed in oral form from the early Middle Ages, and had been reduced to writing by men like Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1140). Later romances were composed by the French poet Chretien de Troyes in the twelfth century and Sir Thomas Malory in 1485, which served as the most important source for Tennyson's epic cycle. For Tennyson, the legend served as foundation for meditations on morality and patriotism, as well as on what made England great and what could potentially threaten that greatness. Despite the depths of Christian imagery found in *Idylls of the King* and such poems as his personal valedictory, *Crossing the Bar*, Tennyson was not an orthodox Christian, but considered himself something of a pantheist.

## NOTES

**DEDICATION** - Tennyson dedicates the poem to Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, who died, leaving his wife and the entire kingdom grieving. The poet pictures him as Arthur's ideal of knighthood.

**THE COMING OF ARTHUR** - Leodegran, king of Camelard, finds his kingdom besieged and sends for help to the newly-crowned king of England, Arthur, the son of Uther Pendragon. Some of the English lords doubt his parentage, however, and rebel against him while he is gone. Arthur falls in love with Leodegran's daughter Guinevere, convinced that together they can unite his kingdom. After defeating his enemies in battle, Arthur asks for Guinevere's hand in marriage, but Leodegran wants assurance of Arthur's parentage first. He calls his advisers, who tell him that only one man knows the truth – Merlin, the magician who served the great Uther. Leodegran summons Sir Bedivere, who tells him that Uther, lusting after the wife of his knight Gorlois, went to war and killed the latter, then seized his wife, dying shortly thereafter. When a son was born to the forlorn woman, he was delivered into the hands of Merlin. The magician turned him over to Sir Anton to rear, then revealed him as the son of Uther when he came of age. The lords, disbelieving and not wanting to submit to anyone's authority, immediately rebelled.

When Bellicent, Arthur's half sister and the widow of King Lot, who had been defeated by Arthur, visits Leodegran, he asks her for information, and she speaks of Arthur's coronation, where he receives the homage of his knights and establishes the Round Table. At that time the Lady of the Lake rises from the waters and entrusts Arthur with the magic sword Excalibur. Bellicent also speaks of her relationship to Arthur - half-siblings, childhood friends. She also advises Leodegran to give his daughter to Arthur, since it has been prophesied that he will never die, but will pass away, then come again and be revered as king by all. Leodegran consents, and Arthur sends Lancelot to fetch Guinevere. The two marry, to the praise of Arthur's knights and the consternation of the ambassadors from Rome, who are seeing their power over Britain wane. Arthur celebrates the day by announcing that he will no longer pay tribute to the Romans.

## THE ROUND TABLE

**Gareth and Lynette** - Gareth, the youngest son of Lot and Bellicent, tires of staying home and being babied by his mother; he longs for adventure. He tells his mother a story of a boy who wanted to climb to reach an eagle's egg, but his mother prevented him from doing so because of the danger involved, and he died of a broken heart. Bellicent insists that he remain at home rather than joining his brothers Gawain and Modred around King Arthur's Round Table, and promises to find him a wife. He replies that he must do the work of Christ rather than being tethered to home and hearth.

Bellicent, still concerned about the legitimacy of Arthur's kingship, asks her son one favor – that he will go to Arthur's court in disguise, work as a servant for a year and a day, and only then reveal his true identity and seek knighthood. Much to his mother's surprise, Gareth agrees to the humiliating condition and leaves early the next morning with two servants. Arriving at Camelot, they find an enchanted city full of wonders. A seer meets them at the gate and warns Gareth that no lie is welcome in the fair city, cautioning him about the deception he is about to practice. Gareth fears encountering his brothers, who would easily recognize him, but does not see them on his way to the court of Arthur. There he sees the great king administer justice, trying cases with great wisdom. Among the shields in the court he sees those of Gawain, richly embellished from great deeds, and Modred, plain and unornamented.

When Gareth asks Arthur for employment in the palace kitchen, Arthur agrees. Sir Kay undertakes to supervise his labors, but Lancelot warns him to tread gently because the lad is of noble birth. Kay instead treats him roughly, but Gareth soon earns the respect of his fellow-laborers. After a month Bellicent relents and releases Gareth from his vow. He immediately seeks out Arthur and tells him everything. Arthur agrees to send him on a quest without as yet revealing his identity, but secretly asks Lancelot to follow him and ensure his safety.

That day a noblewoman named Lynette comes to Arthur, begging him to send Sir Lancelot to deliver her sister Lyonors, who is imprisoned in her castle by four fierce knights, the Brotherhood of Day and Night, one of whom demands her hand in marriage. Gareth volunteers to undertake the quest and, much to the surprise of those who don't know his identity, Arthur grants his permission. Lynette, however, is furious about being given nothing more than a kitchen servant to assist her and flees in anger. Gareth quickly mounts the war-horse Arthur had given him and rides after her. Kay pursues him to bring him back to his kitchen chores, but Gareth unseats him and continues to follow Lynette, though she spurns him and tells him he smells of kitchen grease. She soon gets lost, but Gareth remains with her despite her insults.

Their ride is interrupted by a servant, who rushes toward them with the news that his master is being drowned in the mire by six villains. Gareth rides to the rescue, despatches three of them and drives off the rest, then delivers the poor bound knight. The rescued man seeks to reward Gareth, but he declines, and Lynette still is not in the least impressed. When the knight invites them home for dinner, she refuses to sit at the same table with Gareth.

The next day they approach the Castle Perilous guarded by the four knights. Gareth defeats Sir Morning-Star at a bridge, spares his life at Lynette's request, and sends him to Camelot to submit to King Arthur. Sir Noonday Sun falls from his horse as they battle in a stream, and he too is sent to Camelot. Lynette still thinks Gareth's victories are the result of pure luck, however. Soon Sir Star of Evening meets the same fate as his brothers, rising repeatedly after

being unhorsed, then finally being cast from the bridge into the river by the intrepid young knight. Finally Lynette acknowledges Gareth's prowess and allows him to ride beside her, then apologizes for her rudeness. When they stop for refreshments at a cave, they are approached by a disguised knight who drives Gareth to the ground, then reveals that he is none other than Lancelot. Lynette quickly scorns him for his defeat, but Lancelot reminds her that he himself has more than once taken a fall. He then tells her Gareth's true history, and informs the young man that he has been named a knight of the Round Table by King Arthur.

Finally the Castle Perilous comes into view, and before it appears a knight all clothed in black on a black charger – Sir Night, also called Death. Gareth rides toward him fearlessly and cleaves his helmet, but is shocked to find inside the armor only a youth. The young man tells Gareth that he had been forced by his brothers into the masquerade as a means for them to trap and destroy Arthur's best knight, Lancelot. None of them imagined that any knight would get so far as to challenge the boy himself. As a result of Gareth's victory, Lyonors is freed; one version of the legend states that she married Gareth, but later variations end with the young knight marrying Lynette.

**The Marriage of Geraint** - Geraint, Prince of Devon and Knight of the Round Table, had married Enid. The two were deeply in love. He bought her lavish garments with which she loved to deck herself in order to please her husband. She was also a favorite of Guinevere, but when rumors began to spread about the Queen's dalliance with Lancelot, Geraint feared lest his wife be tainted with scandal. He seeks and receives Arthur's permission to return to his home, allegedly to cleanse his domain of bandits. He takes Enid with him, but dotes on her so much that he totally ignores his responsibilities. This causes her and others to lose respect for him, and he, discerning her flagging affection, begins to fear that she is being unfaithful, while she ponders what she might do to help him combat the rumors of effeminacy that are spreading among his subjects. Both, for very different reasons, decide that she should accompany him as he rides to seek fame and glory. In preparation, she puts on a very simple outfit – the one she wore when first he saw her.

The two had first met when Geraint, arriving late for a hunt, came upon Guinevere, who was watching Arthur and his knights. She saw a handsome knight, accompanied by a lady and a dwarf, ride past and sent one of her maidens to find his name. The knight treated the maiden rudely, and Geraint offered to pursue him, discover his identity, and avenge the insult he had given the Queen. Geraint follows the three to a town protected by a fortress. The town is in an uproar because of a Sparrow Hawk. He seeks lodging and weapons in the town, but is told that no weapons are to be found because there is to be a great tournament on the following day. As for lodging, he is directed to the castle of Earl Yniol. The Earl lives in genteel poverty, but welcomes the young knight. As he enters the courtyard of the dilapidated castle, he hears a woman with a beautiful voice singing – it is Enid, the daughter of the Earl. Geraint is immediately smitten. Yniol then sends Enid to fetch food for their guest, and she graciously serves them. Geraint then tells Yniol about his quest, and wonders if the Sparrow Hawk is the very same knight who insulted Guinevere. Yniol confirms his suspicions, and identifies the villain as his nephew. The knight had once sought Enid's hand, and having been refused, spread false rumors about Yniol that led to his ruin. He swears that he has no arms to offer Geraint for the tourney except a few old, rusty ones. He offers them to Geraint, but warns him that he cannot fight in the tournament unless he has a fair lady to defend. The noble knight then begs the hand of Enid should he prove victorious on the morrow.

The next day at the tournament, Geraint challenges the Sparrow Hawk to combat, and after a long and evenly-matched battle, is victorious. With his sword at the throat of the vanquished knight, he demands his name, which is Edyrn, son of Nudd. He then, on pain of death, demands that Edyrn travel to Camelot to beg pardon of the Queen, and that he restore to Yniol his stolen earldom. Edyrn complies, is forgiven, and becomes a great knight in Arthur's army, ultimately dying in a great battle. After the tournament, Geraint wants to take Enid to Camelot for their wedding, and to introduce her to the Queen. She hesitates, fearing the plainness of her clothing would be out of place among such splendor. The next day, the plunder from their castle is returned, and with it a lovely dress that Enid had received from her mother three years before. She dons it for the trip to Camelot, but when Geraint sees her, he asks her to wear her old dress instead because it was the garment she wore when he first fell in love with her. He explains that Guinevere had desired to clothe his bride in beautiful garments, and so he wanted to allow the Queen that privilege, hoping at the same time that Guinevere and Enid would become friends. He also, seeing Enid's ready obedience to what must have seemed a strange request, becomes more confident than ever of her love for him, asserting that nothing in the future could ever cause the merest shadow of mistrust to pass between them. When they arrive at Camelot, the Queen greets them with joy and bedecks the new princess in splendor for their wedding.

It is the memory of these events that causes Enid to put on her old silk dress when she follows her husband from Dover.

**Geraint and Enid** - After the flashback account of the marriage of Geraint and Enid, the poet picks up the story where the previous section had started – with the two newlyweds beginning to mistrust one another. Geraint's mistrust is such that he won't allow Enid to ride with him, but forces her to ride ahead and forbids her to speak to him. Meanwhile, he casts aside his gold, determined to fight whatever battles might ensue with no more than he has with him. His poor wife, meanwhile, fearfully ponders what she might have done to offend her beloved husband. When Enid encounters three evil knights who are preparing to ambush Geraint, she goes back to warn him. He berates her for disobeying him by speaking, then proceeds to kill the three knights, strip off their armor, and order Enid to drive the abandoned horses, with the armor on their backs, before them into the wilderness.

As they continue to travel, Geraint longs to confront her with the words he had taken for a confession of her infidelity, but fears what he might hear or have to do should he do so. Soon she meets three more knights, more vicious than the first trio, who covet the three horses and sets of armor and determine to kill Geraint in order to get them. Should she again infuriate her lord and speak to him? She does so, and he again vilifies her. The outcome of the battle is the same – Geraint slays the malefactors, ties their armor to their horses, and commands Enid to drive them before her.

They soon approach a town, and see a young man coming toward them with food for the field workers. Geraint, by now feeling sorry for his wife, begs food for her; she eats little, but Geraint, famished from his exertions, eats the entire store. He then offers the boy one of the horses with its armor in return for the food. The boy thanks him, and tells him that his lord will surely want to invite them to dinner in his castle. Geraint refuses, asking instead for simple lodgings. The earl of the place, Limours, Enid's former suitor, bursts into their lodgings that night, and Geraint invites him and his companions to stay for food and wine. After drinking their fill, Limours asks Geraint's permission to speak to Enid, which the prince grants. Limours then

tells her of his unabated passion, and offers to imprison Geraint, who clearly loves her no more, so they can be together. Enid puts him off by proposing that he kidnap her the next morning, but meanwhile warns Geraint. He gives the host of the inn the remaining five horses and sets of armor as payment, then leaves the domain of Limours, again warning Enid to remain silent. Limours pursues them, however, and Enid warns him with a point of the finger. He is again victorious, killing Limours and routing his knights.

As they travel toward the lands of the bandit Earl Doorm, known as the Bull, Geraint begins to bleed under his armor, having been wounded in the battle against Limours and his men. Suddenly he falls unconscious from his horse, and Enid rushes to tend to his wound. As she weeps over her husband, many knights pass, but do nothing to aid her; one even chases her horse away in the violence of his flight. Soon Earl Doorm himself appears. He orders his men to take the fallen Geraint to his castle, where Enid continues to watch over him. Geraint recovers consciousness and is pleased to see Enid weeping over him, but says nothing, deciding she must be tested further. When Doorm and his men return from their raid with much plunder, they set to feasting, and he, observing Enid's beauty, offers to make her mistress of his castle. He offers her food and drink, but she refuses both until her true lord is able to eat and drink with her; he then offers her a beautiful dress, which she also refuses. When Doorm in his rage strikes her, Geraint hears her cry, rises from his shield, and strikes off Doorm's head with a single blow, after which all his retainers flee.

Geraint then apologizes to Enid and promises never to doubt her love again. The two ride off together, and soon encounter Edyrn, who again thanks Geraint for bringing about his reformation. He brings word from Arthur demanding that Doorm's robber band disperse, and Geraint tells him of the bandit earl's defeat and death. Arthur then goes to rid his kingdom of other bandits while Geraint and Enid go to Camelot for a time of recuperation. Once he is well, he and his wife return to Devon and faithfully guard Arthur's marches until the day when Geraint nobly dies in battle.

**Balin and Balan** - Balin and Balan, two knights, station themselves at a spring outside Camelot and challenge anyone who passes to a joust in order to demonstrate their superiority to Arthur's knights. One day Arthur himself rides their way and, without revealing his identity, challenges and defeats both of them. He then summons them to court and asks them to explain their behavior. They answer that they had been exiled from Camelot three years earlier for injuring one of Arthur's knights in the Great Hall in response to an insult, and had since sought to prove their worth by taking on all comers. Arthur then pardons them and readmits them to the Round Table.

Arthur sends men to collect tribute from Pellam, who as a result of defeat by Arthur had become his tributary, but lately had refused to pay tribute. The men go and find him living as an ascetic surrounded by relics. He refers them to his son Garlon, who reluctantly pays the tribute money. On their way back, the men find a knight, speared in the back, and are told of a demon living in the woods, and locate his cave. Arthur asks for a volunteer to hunt the demon, and Balan steps forward. Before he leaves, he reminds Balin of the need to keep his spirits up and not be overwhelmed by despair at his past misdeeds.

Balin decides to model himself on Lancelot, but knows that he can never attain the heights of that great knight. He admires both his prowess and his gentleness of character, and concludes that the latter comes from his attachment to Guinevere. Balin then decides to seek some favor from Guinevere that might inspire him as well. Guinevere graciously allows him to place her

crown upon his shield, and he is overjoyed. One day, however, as he sits in the garden, he witnesses a meeting between Lancelot and Guinevere, and his shock at their professions of love drives him from the court. He then follows the path taken by his brother.

As he rides, his despair makes him careless. He passes the cave inhabited by the demon, hears him coming up behind, and narrowly avoids the spear aimed at his back. His pursuit is in vain, so he continues to the castle of King Pellam. The knights there ask about the crown he wears on his shield, and he proudly tells them it is a favor from Guinevere. Garlon, who has no love for Arthur, speaks scornfully of the ignorance of the men of Camelot who would wink at the relationship between Arthur's wife and his favorite knight. Balin controls his temper and does nothing but rebuke Garlon for his disparaging words. Garlon continues to taunt him, however, and finally Balin can stand no more and draws his sword, killing him with a single blow and splintering his sword in the process. Garlon's knights then pursue him, and he ducks into the chapel of the castle for refuge. There he finds an ancient spear – the one that had pierced Christ's side, brought to England by Joseph of Arimathea, which he takes, riding quickly into the forest on his steed. Worn out and greatly regretting his lapse into violence once again, he considers himself unworthy of the shield graced by Guinevere's favor and hangs it on a tree.

In the forest he encounters Vivien, a lady from the castle of King Mark. She sings a song of the return of paganism and sun-worship, portending the fall of Christianity and Arthur's Table with it. She finds Balin sleeping, invents a tale of having been threatened by an evil knight, and begs him to escort her to Arthur's court. He refuses, insisting he is no longer worthy to call himself a knight because of his inability to control his anger. She continues to deceive Balin, telling him that she had witnessed a tryst between Lancelot and Guinevere, and mocking his shame in the face of one much greater. He believes her because of his own experience in the garden, and defaces the shield that bears Guinevere's crown.

His cry of anguish is heard through the forest by his brother Balan, who thinks it the cry of the demon he seeks. He rushes toward the sound and wields his lance. In the battle between the two brothers, Balan is killed by the lance that pierced Christ's side, while Balin dies when his brother's horse falls upon him. Before they succumb, they tell one another their stories and forgive each other.

**Merlin and Vivien** - Vivien, whose father died in battle against Arthur and whose mother died in childbirth while weeping over his corpse, is sent to Camelot by King Mark of Cornwall to use her wiles to destroy the Round Table. When she arrives at Camelot, she throws herself at the feet of Guinevere, telling her that her father had been killed in Arthur's service and that she is being pursued by King Mark, who has evil designs on her beauty. Before going hawking with Lancelot, Guinevere agrees to test Vivien's story further. While they hunt, Vivien spreads quiet rumors among the ladies of the court, then sneaks away. The poison begins to spread, to the point that Vivien even tries to plant evil thoughts in the mind of Arthur himself, though without success.

She then determines to turn her wiles on Merlin. She spends as much time with him as possible, planting first mild slanders in his mind, then following them with more powerful words of scandal until he begins to feel weighed down in his heart. She follows him to the Breton coast, desiring to weave a charm around him that will incapacitate him completely. In order to accomplish this, she seeks to seduce him. She tells him that if he really loves her, he will trust her enough to tell her the secret charm that will bind him. Merlin refuses, fearing her treachery and seeing in her request one such as Eve made to Adam and regretting ever having told her about

the charm in the first place. Vivien rebukes him for his lack of trust in her, and teasingly tells him that she will find out the charm on her own.

He then tells her a story of a king who waged war to gain the maiden of his dreams, but found that all loved her as much as he. The king then sought for a wizard who could weave a charm to keep her forever his own. Many wizards tried and failed, and their heads wound up on pikes above the castle walls. Finally the king's agents brought an old man to the castle who taught the king the charm he sought, which made the queen invisible to all but him and conscious of his presence alone. Merlin then tells Vivien that this old wizard's book came down to him. Vivien tells him to give her the book at once, for if he refuses, she will discover it on her own, and then will surely use it against him. Merlin tells her that she could never read the book anyway because of the language in which its spells were written, but insists that he will not give it to her, even if she keeps her vow not to use it against him, for fear she should enchant some knight of the Round Table. She swears that she would not let one of those swine touch her, and begins to pour into Merlin's ears the scandals she has been spreading at court. He tells her the truth behind each false rumor, though he has little to say in defense of Lancelot and Guinevere. When she attacks Arthur as cowardly for doing nothing about the behavior of his wife and his best friend, however, he chides her for slandering the purest man on the face of the earth whose only fault is to think all men as good as himself.

As Vivien continues to spew her poison, Merlin determines even more not to give her the fatal charm. He is convinced that she slanders others because she tried and failed to corrupt various among Arthur's knights, and because she judges all by her own foulness; he even goes so far as to call her *harlot*. She responds with indignation, then with tears, and he succumbs and seeks to comfort her. She vows to leave him forever despite her love, and calls on heaven to strike her dead if her promise not to use the charm against him is false. A storm arises, and the oak under which they seek shelter is struck by lightning. She fears that Heaven has heard her oath, and she clings to Merlin for comfort and protection. He finally gives in and tells her the charm, which she weaves around him while he is sleeping, leaving him as good as dead. She then runs away, shrieking in triumph at the fool she has left bound behind her.

**Lancelot and Elaine** - Before Arthur had been crowned king, he had come upon the skeleton of a former king who had been killed in battle by his brother. Arthur took his crown, which contained nine diamonds, and used the diamonds as prizes in an annual joust he sponsored after gaining the throne. In each of the first eight years, Lancelot had won the prize, but had kept the diamonds hidden, intending to give all nine to Guinevere at once. When the time for the joust arrives, Guinevere is ill, and Lancelot declares that he will bypass the competition to sit with her. She reproves him, warning that tongues will wag if he stays with her in her bedroom, and advises him to go in disguise, using as his excuse to Arthur that he didn't want to intimidate the rest of the competitors.

Taking a back way to avoid being seen, he gets lost in the forest and comes to the castle of Astolat, where he meets the lord of the castle, his two sons, and his daughter Elaine. He asks them to lend him a plain shield and to watch over his well-known one for him. Lavaine, the younger son, offers to accompany him and participate in the joust, hoping to win the diamond and give it to Elaine. Lancelot politely compliments her beauty, and she instantly falls in love with him, despite a face that has been marred by many battles, as well as by the guilt of loving Guinevere while serving her husband the king. As he tells them tales of Arthur's wars, she

becomes ever more enamored, and when he prepares to leave, she asks him to wear her favor in his helm. He initially refuses, but consents when she argues that this will further mask his identity, which she herself still does not know. She then takes his shield to an upper room in the castle and lovingly cares for it.

As Lancelot and Lavaine travel toward Camelot, the great knight reveals his identity to the young man, much to his delight, and Lavaine can hardly wait to see King Arthur himself. When the tournament begins, Lancelot waits to observe who are the stronger fighters, and then unseats them one by one. The knights of the Round Table, irate at seeing this unknown knight approaching the glorious deeds of the great Lancelot, descend on him in one body, lame his horse, and wound him severely in the side. Lavaine helps Lancelot onto his own horse, and the wounded knight succeeds in winning the day. When offered the diamond, however, he refuses it and rides off into the forest. There Lavaine draws the point of the lance from his side. Lancelot passes out, and Lavaine takes him to the cave of a nearby hermit who was formerly a knight. The hermit, over a period of weeks, nurses the injured Lancelot back to health.

Meanwhile, Sir Gawain is sent by Arthur on a quest to find the unknown and wounded knight and give him the diamond he has rightly earned. Gawain is not pleased to be taken away from the feasting on such an errand, and sets forth full of anger. When Arthur returns to Camelot, he finds Guinevere recovered and asks her where Lancelot is. She tells him that Lancelot went to the tournament in disguise, and he informs her of the victory of the mysterious knight, and also of the wound he received. He also tells her, all in ignorance of her affections, of the favor worn by the unknown warrior. Though she hides her feelings from her husband, the Queen is dismayed to find that Lancelot has been disloyal to her love.

Gawain, frustrated with what seems a fruitless quest, comes finally to Astolat. The lord tells him that the unknown knight must soon return and invites him to stay awhile. He finds Elaine attractive, but she resists his advances. When she tells him of the shield for which she is caring and asks him if he can identify its owner, he immediately recognizes it as belonging to Lancelot. Eager to cause trouble for the famed but unfaithful knight, he gives Elaine the diamond and asks her to give it to the rightful owner when he returns. He then returns to Camelot and reports that the mysterious tournament victor is indeed Lancelot and tells Arthur what he has done with the diamond. The king then rebukes him for disobedience. Gawain, now angrier than ever, begins to spread gossip around the court about Lancelot's new love, knowing the pain it will bring to Guinevere.

Elaine, pining away for Lancelot and dreaming that he is desperately wounded and in need of her care, begs her father's permission to seek her brother. He knows her real intention, but recognizes that the diamond must be delivered to its rightful owner, and thus consents. Near Camelot she encounters Lavaine, who leads her to the cave where Lancelot lies. He is still weak, but she tells him the whole story of her adventures and gives him the diamond, hoping against hope that he will in turn give it to her. He, however, has eyes for no one but Guinevere, and is incapable of feeling anything for the gentle maiden who would sacrifice all for him. Day after day she comes to the cave to nurse him, and when he recovers, the hermit tells her that she has saved the great knight's life. Lancelot, meanwhile, begins to feel real affection for Elaine, though he cannot love her as she desires to be loved by him. When the maid finally realizes the hopelessness of her devotion, she determines to gain his love or to die in the attempt.

After his health improves, Lancelot returns to Astolat with Elaine and Lavaine. She follows him around everywhere, and before he leaves for Camelot, he begs her to ask of him one

wish so that he might show his gratitude. She is reluctant to speak, but finally admits that her fondest wish is to be his wife. Lancelot responds that he will never marry, that her love is merely a childish infatuation, and that, when she finds a suitable man of her own age, he will endow them with wealth up to half his kingdom. Elaine insists that she wants nothing but his love, then faints.

Her father, hearing their conversation, advises Lancelot to treat her roughly in order to break her crush on him. He then rides off, having removed her favor from his helmet, without so much as a backward glance as Elaine watches from her tower. Her heart is torn with a song of love and death, and she determines to follow Lancelot to Camelot. Her elder brother Torre threatens to kill Lancelot and her father tells her of her knight's love for the Queen, but she silences them both and asks her father to call for a priest so that she might make her confession and die. Her last request is that the letter she has written to Lancelot should be placed in her hand after she dies, that her body should be laid out in all of her best finery, then placed on a barge and floated down to Camelot [reminiscent of *The Lady of Shalott*]. Eleven days later, she dies.

On the day that Elaine's body floats down to Camelot, Lancelot presents to Guinevere the nine diamonds he has won in the jousts. She treats him haughtily, and he begs her to ignore the rumors that are circulating concerning him and Elaine. Guinevere hotly insists that the diamonds would more adorn his new love and throws them out the castle window into the stream below, just as the barge containing Elaine's body passes by. The barge comes to rest before the castle gates, and Arthur orders the body brought into the Great Hall. The knights and ladies, including Lancelot and the Queen, gather to pity the lovely maiden. Arthur then reads the letter clutched in her hand, which bemoans the fact that her love for Lancelot was unrequited. Arthur orders her buried with all pomp and ceremony, Guinevere apologizes for her jealousy and Lancelot forgives her, then Arthur asks if Lancelot could not have found it in his heart to love such a fair maid who gave him such pure devotion. Lancelot then sits down by the stream as the barge floats into the distance, feeling the weight of his guilt, not only for his role in Elaine's death, but also for his illicit love for Guinevere. He may be the greatest knight in the world, but his sin makes him want to die for shame.

**The Holy Grail** - One of the knights of the Round Table, Sir Percivale, retires to a monastery after his fighting days are over. Shortly before the old knight dies, Ambrosius, one of the monks, asks him why he left the realm of knighthood for that of the cloister. Sir Percivale then begins to tell the story of the Holy Grail, the cup from which Jesus and His disciples drank at the Last Supper, later brought by Joseph of Arimathea to Glastonbury, where it became a source of healing to all who touched it. Eventually the wickedness of man became so great that the cup was taken away into heaven. When Arthur formed the Round Table, it was hoped that the spread of righteousness that resulted would cause the Grail to reappear.

One night Percivale's sister, a nun of purest holiness, is awakened to find the Grail floating into her room on a beam of light. She then begs Percivale and his fellow knights to fast and pray so that they, too, might see the holy vision. Young Sir Galahad is also inspired by the quest, and Percivale's sister cuts off her hair, weaves it into a belt, works into the belt a figure of the Grail in silver thread, and sends Galahad off with her blessing to find it. Merlin had left a magic chair on which was engraved, "No man could sit but he should lose himself." Galahad, believing that only by losing himself could he find what he desired, sits in the chair. The instant he sits, the roof is torn asunder and the Holy Grail appears in a cloud, to the wonderment of the gathered knights but seen only by Galahad. Percivale and many of the others then swear an oath to undergo a year-

long quest so that they might see the Grail plainly as Galahad and Percivale's sister had. Arthur soon returns, hears what has happened, and warns the knights of the dangers they face. He knows they must fulfill their vows, but fears that many will never return.

After a grand tournament the following day, the knights depart on their quest. Percivale, initially confident of success, is reminded as he rides of his many sins, and comes to believe the whispers he hears in his heart that he is not fit for such a task. As he travels, he sees visions of glory and splendor, but each one crumbles into dust as soon as he touches it. When he comes upon a poor hermitage, the monk receives him, and upon hearing his story, tells him that he cannot see the Grail because he lacks humility. Galahad then appears in shining armor and tells of seeing the Grail perpetually as he follows it in his victories; he promises Percivale that he, too, shall see it when Galahad dies. The pure knight then travels to the Celestial City, and as he enters, Percivale sees the Grail singing over his head. Knowing that no man will ever see it again, he returns to Camelot.

Ambrosius then asks Percivale why he has never heard these tales of the Grail, and the knight tells him that the sins of those who sought it have kept the tales from the knowledge of men. Percivale himself, in the process of pursuing the quest, had encountered a former love who had come to great estate. She loved him still, and vowed to give herself and all her lands to him. Her people begged him to become their king. For a while he succumbed, but one night the quest that he had for all practical purposes abandoned came again to his mind, and he stole sadly away, thinking of her no more.

But what of the other knights? Sir Lancelot is rumored to have gone mad in the quest. Sir Bors is captured by the heathen and imprisoned, but then is miraculously released soon after seeing the Grail in the night sky. Gawain gives up the quest. Only a tenth of the knights return to Camelot. When Arthur asks for Lancelot, the great knight appears and admits that he swore to pursue the quest in the hopes of having the blackness of his sin purged, but was told by a holy man that he could not see the Grail until he set his sin aside. He goes far across the sea to the enchanted castle of Carbonek, where he ascends to a high tower where the Grail is to be seen. For him it is enshrouded, however, and he is told that the quest is not for him. Gawain tries to discount the testimony given by Arthur's knights, but Arthur, sad that so many of his knights have not returned, is yet gratified that a few have indeed found the Grail, in whatever fashion they may have done so.

**Pelleas and Ettarre** - Arthur, in order to replenish the Round Table after losing so many knights to the quest for the Holy Grail, seeks more men to introduce into the knightly fraternity. A young man named Pelleas presents himself for knighthood, telling the king that he seeks the sword and circlet of gold offered as prizes in the coming tournament, the former for himself and the latter for his lady love. On the way to Arthur's castle, young Pelleas had lay down to rest near a grove of trees, and there had expressed his desire for a special love to call his own.

Soon he hears voices, and rises to see a group of maidens on horseback, apparently lost in the forest. He approaches, and Ettarre, the leader of the group, tells him that they are damsels errant, on their way to the tournament to joust against the knights, and asks him to show them the way. Pelleas, who has little experience of women, becomes tongue-tied, bringing upon his head the scorn of the company. He offers to lead them to their destination. As they travel, he pays special attention to Ettarre, and she, though she cares nothing for him, flatters him in the hope that he might win for her the circlet of gold in the knightly competition and name her the Queen of

Beauty. She asks him to fight for her and promises to love him if he wins, and he agrees, though her companions seem not to take her promise very seriously. On the basis of this promise, Pelleas requests and is granted knighthood from Arthur.

Arthur restricts the jousting to the young and inexperienced knights so that Pelleas might have a chance to win his prize, and indeed he carries the day, and promptly presents the gold circlet to Ettarre. Having received what she desired, however, she smiles on him no longer. Her scorn is so apparent that Guinevere rebukes her for her unkindness, but her only answer is that, had Guinevere not kept Lancelot otherwise occupied, Pelleas never would have won. On the journey home, Pelleas follows Ettarre and her companions, but she orders her maids to keep him busy so he cannot come near her, and when they arrive at her castle, the portcullis crashes down after them, leaving Pelleas alone outside.

Each day he returns to the castle, sitting astride his horse outside the walls, but is not admitted. Ettarre, becoming angrier by the day, sends her knights to drive him away, but he defeats each one in turn. Finally she calls on them to fall upon him all at once, bind him, and bring him into the castle. Seeing an opportunity to draw nearer his love, he submits to them and is brought in a prisoner. He reminds her of her promise to love him, and expresses his confidence that this shabby treatment is nothing more than a trial of his faith. He promises to be content in her dungeon if he can but see her once a day, knowing that she must ultimately yield and keep her word. She cannot bear the thought of his presence each day, and orders her knights to release him and cast him out of the castle. Still he returns and stands outside the walls. Ettarre finally orders her knights to sally forth and kill him, and failing in that to bind him as before and bring him into her presence. Gawain passes by and offers to help Pelleas fight off his assailants, but Pelleas refuses aid, insisting that he is merely fulfilling his lady's will. Thus he is again bound and brought into the castle. This time Ettarre screams at her knights, who again have failed to rid her of this pest, and orders him once again released. Pelleas, seeing that his lady truly does not love him, tells her that, though she can never destroy his love, she will see his face no more. For the briefest moment, Ettarre asks herself why she cannot love such a noble young man, but says nothing.

Outside the castle, Gawain releases him from his bonds and asks why he has so shamed the Round Table into which he has been newly received. Pelleas responds that he is simply being loyal to his true love despite her scorn for him. Gawain proposes a plan – he will tell Ettarre that he has slain Pelleas and be welcomed into her castle. He will then praise the young knight's virtues day and night, and in the process make her long for the one she has driven to his death within the span of three days. As those days pass, Pelleas wanders aimlessly, waiting for word from Gawain. Finally he can wait no more, and returns to the castle, which he is surprised to find open and unguarded. He finds three pavilions on the hill; one contains the three boorish knights of Ettarre, the second her scornful damsels, and in the third he finds Ettarre and Gawain asleep. He thinks first to kill them both, then remembers his oath of brotherhood to the Round Table and decides instead to leave his precious sword resting across their throats as they sleep. He then rides away in anger and despair, consoling himself by telling himself that his love was nothing more than lust, and devoutly wishing that an earthquake would bring her castle tumbling down over her faithless head.

When Ettarre awakes, she feels the sword at her throat, recognizes it, and angrily accuses Gawain of lying in order to enjoy her bed. She realizes that Pelleas could have killed them in their sleep but did not, and from that day forward for the rest of her life, she longed for him whom she

had scorned so foolishly. After riding hard all night, Pelleas collapses outside the hermitage where Percivale is living. In the midst of a nightmare, Percivale stands beside him and tries to calm him down. In the course of their conversation, Percivale lets slip the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, and the young knight reacts angrily, wondering if *any* of the members of the Round Table have kept their vows. He mounts his horse and rides toward Camelot, where he sees the blackened roof of the Great Hall, ruined by the descent of the Grail. Soon Lancelot emerges on his horse. Pelleas attacks him and is defeated, but when he begs for death, Lancelot instead bids him speak his peace. He follows the great knight back to Camelot, and there is greeted and consoled by Guinevere for his defeat, which is after all no shame. She is ignorant of what he knows, but his cold response toward her speaks volumes, and Modred discerns that the time for putting into motion his villainous plot has finally arrived.

**The Last Tournament** - Once Arthur and Lancelot had been out riding and had heard a child crying. Lancelot scaled sheer rock and found in an eagle's nest a baby girl with a ruby necklace wrapped around her neck. After Lancelot rescued the child, Arthur gave her to Guinevere to raise. She named the baby Nestling, but when the child died, she gave the ruby ornament to Arthur to use as a prize in a tournament. Arthur agrees, but wonders why Guinevere refuses to wear the diamonds won for her by Lancelot that he had rescued from the river.

On the day of the tournament, a churl, nearly torn to pieces, appears before the king and reports that he was maimed by the Red Knight, who had spoken doom against Arthur and his kingdom. Arthur summons the younger knights to go with him to purge the kingdom of this heathen scourge, leaving Lancelot in charge of the tournament. Lancelot wants to lead the knights and leave Arthur at home, but the king insists. As the jousts proceed on a rainy, windy day, Lancelot observes many violations of the rules, most notably by Modred, but says nothing. When Sir Tristram joins the lists, Lancelot longs to meet him in combat, but refrains, and the knight takes the prize. He refuses, however, to declare a Queen of Beauty because his true love, Isolt, is not present. Lancelot can do nothing but mourn how far the Round Table has fallen and how little courtesy remains. The banquet that night is raucous, and Guinevere retires to her chamber with heavy heart. The next day, Tristram banters with Dagonet the fool, who speaks much truth concerning the decline of Arthur's kingdom.

Tristram then leaves Camelot to give his prize to his beloved Isolt, but his conscience is troubled by the memory of another Isolt, whom he had married and left in Brittany. He dreams that the two women are fighting over the ruby necklace and pull it apart between them. Arthur and his knights, meanwhile, have tracked down the Red Knight and find a member of the Round Table hanging from a tree outside his castle. The Red Knight attacks Arthur, but Arthur unseats him and the young knights finish him off. They then go into the castle, slaughter all within, and burn the castle to the ground. Arthur once again sees his kingdom at peace, but returns to Camelot with a heavy heart.

Tristram reaches Tintagil and finds Isolt waiting for him, though her husband King Mark is near. She warns Tristram that Mark is determined to kill him. They profess their love, but Tristram refuses to swear an oath of undying affection, knowing the inconstancy of both. He says they should simply love one another while they have the chance. She pleads with him, however, and he finally promises to love her till death, but just as he places the ruby necklace around her throat, King Mark comes up behind him and splits his skull in two. Meanwhile, Arthur returns to Camelot and finds the fool weeping on the floor of Guinevere's empty chamber – the Queen has fled.

**Guinevere** - Guinevere had fled the court because of the machinations of Modred, who seeks to gain the throne by spreading rumors and introducing confusion and disunity into the Round Table. His hatred for Lancelot is of long standing, ever since, while Modred was up in a tree spying on Guinevere, Lancelot had pulled him down into the dirt, and Guinevere knows that her affair with the great knight will be a weapon in the hands of the traitor. She tries to convince Lancelot to leave Camelot, but he cannot bear to part with her. Finally they decide, after one final night together in the King's absence, to part forever. Vivien overhears their plan and tells Modred, who gathers some of his thugs and pounds on the bedroom door when the two are within. Lancelot drives them from the passage and the two lovers flee, Lancelot to his castle and Guinevere to the convent at Almesbury.

She knows, however, that their parting comes too late. Their reputations are ruined, and the heathen tribes are already gathering to invade the weakened kingdom. Arthur takes his depleted army to make war on Lancelot, while Modred, in league with the invaders from the north, usurps the throne. Meanwhile, the novice who serves Guinevere in the convent, ignorant of her identity, speaks innocently of the wicked queen who has brought down a noble kingdom, and tells her of evil omens that had preceded her marriage to Arthur. Her words, spoken in ignorance, sting Guinevere like nettles, and she drives the girl from her room.

While she reminisces about the early days of her friendship with Lancelot and recalls that, from the very beginning, Arthur seemed to her cold and distant, the King himself enters her cell. He comes from the war with Lancelot, in which many noble knights have lost their lives. He rebukes her for destroying the kingdom he had worked so hard to build, and speaks of the laws of chivalry that had replaced the brutality of earlier times. He assures her of his forgiveness and tells her that he will leave a guard to protect her, hoping one day to meet in heaven, where they may love one another fully and freely. He then returns to the wars, caring little that seers have predicted his death in the ensuing battle. Guinevere then takes vows and enters the convent, eventually becoming the abbess and dying three years after assuming that holy office.

**THE PASSING OF ARTHUR** - Sir Bedivere tells the tale of Arthur's final days. He prays in his tent, bemoaning to the Lord the failure of all his efforts. He is then visited by the ghost of Sir Gawain, killed in battle against Lancelot, who says that all pleasure is vain, and that Arthur will die the next day and pass to a far-off island. Bedivere tries to comfort him and assure him that the traitor knights led by Modred will not triumph.

The next day Arthur's army pursues Modred's forces to the coast, where a thick mist keeps the knights from seeing clearly those they fight. When the wind drives away the mist, Arthur sees a field covered with corpses. He asks Bedivere if he is now no more than king of the dead, but then sees Modred standing before him. They fight, and Modred gives Arthur a mortal wound at the same time that Excalibur brings down the king's mortal enemy. With the remnant of the Round Table lying dead, Arthur gives Bedivere his sword and tells him to cast it far into the waters. Bedivere cannot bring himself to cast Excalibur away, and hides the sword in the reeds. Arthur rebukes him for his disobedience and sends him back to finish the task. Again, however, Bedivere convinces himself that the sword should be preserved for posterity. The third time he obeys, and sees the Lady of the Lake catch the sword and brandish it three times before taking it with her below.

Bedivere then carries the wounded Arthur to a waiting funeral barge, where he is received by three queens. Arthur then tells him he will go to the isle of Avilion, there to be healed of his wounds, and Bedivere believes that he will someday return.

**TO THE QUEEN** - The Epilogue is addressed to Queen Victoria, encouraging her in her mourning over the death of her beloved Prince Albert not to allow Britain to falter in carrying out her destiny.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- King Arthur – The son of Uther Pendragon, and the king who during his monarchy unites England and establishes the Round Table and a reign of justice.
- Guinevere – The daughter of Leodegran, king of Cameliard, she is wooed and wed by Arthur, but later falls in love with Lancelot. Their affair leads to the destruction of Arthur's kingdom.
- Merlin – The sorcerer who served Uther, and later serves Arthur as well. He succumbs to Vivien's charms and is trapped in an enchanted state.
- Lancelot - Arthur's most trusted knight and closest friend, he has an ongoing affair with Queen Guinevere.
- Modred - Arthur's nephew, he is determined to destroy Camelot and the Round Table. He usurps the throne, is killed in battle by Arthur, but in the process deals the king a mortal blow.
- Bedivere – Knighted by Arthur on the day of his coronation, he tells Leodegran the truth of Arthur's parentage. He is also the last surviving member of the Round Table, and carries the critically wounded Arthur to the barge that takes him to Avilion after returning Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake.
- Bellicent - Arthur's half sister, she is the daughter of Gorlois and Ygerne, the widow of King Lot of Orkney, and the mother of Gawain, Gareth, and Modred.
- Gawain - A selfish and shallow knight, he seeks his own interests every time he appears in the poem, even when he goes in search of the Holy Grail.
- Gareth – The youngest son of Lot and Bellicent, he secretly goes to Camelot to seek knighthood, goes on a quest to help the Lady Lynette, and marries her after completing the quest successfully.
- Sir Kay – Arthur's seneschal, he treats Gareth harshly while the latter is working in Arthur's kitchen.
- Lynette – A noblewoman who begs Sir Lancelot to deliver her sister, who is imprisoned by four knights, she scorns Gareth when he volunteers, but eventually comes to love him.

- Geraint - A young knight who, while seeking to avenge an insult to Guinevere, meets and marries a maiden named Enid.
- Enid - Geraint's wife, she is entranced with fine clothes. Her friendship with Guinevere leads her husband to wonder about her fidelity.
- Earl Limours – Enid's former suitor, he seeks to take her away from Geraint when he sees her husband scorn her.
- Earl Doorm – A renegade noble known as the Bull, he brings the wounded Geraint and Enid back to his castle and offers to make her his mistress.
- Balin and Balan – Two brothers, exiled from Arthur's court, who return to seek redemption, but wind up killing each other unintentionally in combat in the forest.
- Mark – King of Cornwall and sworn enemy of Arthur, he sends Vivien to corrupt and destroy the Round Table.
- Vivien – Her father died in battle against Arthur, and she was born as her mother died in childbirth while weeping over his corpse. She has sworn vengeance against Arthur, and is determined to use her wiles to bring his Table down. She succeeds in weaving a charm around Merlin that removes him from the court forever.
- Elaine – Daughter of the Lord of Astolat, she guards and cherishes Lancelot's shield, which he left in her father's castle on the way to a joust, nurses him as he recovers from his wounds, and later dies because her love for him is unrequited.
- Lavaine – Elaine's brother, he accompanies the disguised Lancelot to the joust in Camelot.
- Percivale – A godly knight who seeks and finds the Holy Grail, seeing it briefly as Galahad passes into the Celestial City.
- Galahad – The purest of the knights of the Round Table, he sees the Grail in Arthur's Great Hall and it remains before him the rest of his days.
- Pelleas – A young knight who falls in love with Ettarre and seeks to win for her a circlet of gold in Arthur's tournament, but is scorned by his love despite his enduring fidelity.
- Ettarre – A haughty lady who flatters Pelleas, but cares nothing for him, only growing to love him when it is too late.
- Dagonet – Arthur's court jester, he was jokingly made a knight by Sir Gawain.
- Tristram – A Cornish knight who has an affair with Isolt, the wife of King Mark, who kills him in her arms.

- Isolt – The wife of Queen Mark who has an affair with Sir Tristram.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Merlin in our time  
 Hath spoken also, not in jest, and sworn  
 Tho’ men may wound him that he will not die,  
 But pass, again to come, and then or now  
 Utterly smite the heathen underfoot,  
 Till these and all men hail him for their king.” (*The Coming of Arthur*, p.24)

“O purblind race of miserable men,  
 How many among us at this very hour  
 Do forge a lifelong trouble for ourselves,  
 By taking true for false, or false for true.” (*Geraint and Enid*, p.79)

“He is all fault who hath no fault at all.  
 For who loves me must have a touch of earth.” (*Guinevere, Lancelot and Elaine*, p.141)

“Obedience is the courtesy due to kings.” (*Arthur, Lancelot and Elaine*, p.155)

“His honor rooted in dishonor stood,  
 And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.” (*Lancelot and Elaine*, p.158)

“Let love be free; free love is for the best.” (*Arthur, Lancelot and Elaine*, p.170)

“I am wrath and shame and hate and evil fame,  
 And like a poisonous wind I pass to blast  
 And blaze the crime of Lancelot and the Queen.” (*Pelleas, Pelleas and Ettarre*, p.205)

“Tell thou the king . . . and say his hour is come,  
 The heathen are upon him, his long lance  
 Broken, and his Excalibur a straw.” (*Red Knight, The Last Tournament*, p.208)

“Ay, ay, my brother fool, the king of fools!  
 Conceits himself as God that he can make  
 Figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk  
 From burning spurge, honey from hornet-combs,  
 And men from beasts – Long live the king of fools!” (*Dagonet, The Last Tournament*,  
 p.215)

“So all the ways were safe from shore to shore,  
 But in the heart of Arthur pain was lord.” (*The Last Tournament*, p.218)

“What might I not have made of thy fair world,  
Had I but loved thy highest creature here?  
It was my duty to have loved the highest;  
It surely was my profit had I known;  
It would have been my pleasure had I seen.  
We needs must love the highest when we see it,  
Not Lancelot, nor another.” (Guinevere, *Guinevere*, p.240)

“I found Him in the shining of the stars,  
I mark’d Him in the flowering of His fields,  
But in His ways with men I find Him not.  
I waged His wars, and now I pass and die.  
O me! for why is all around us here  
As if some lesser god had made the world,  
But had not force to shape it as he would,  
Till the High God behold it from beyond,  
And enter it, and make it beautiful?  
Or else as if the world were wholly fair,  
But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,  
And have not power to see it as it is -  
Perchance, because we see not to the close;-  
For I, being simple, sought to work His will,  
And have but stricken with the sword in vain,  
And all whereon I lean’d in wife and friend  
Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm  
Reels back into the beast, and is no more.  
My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death!  
Nay - God my Christ - I pass but shall not die.” (Arthur, *The Passing of Arthur*, p.242)

“For now I see the true old times are dead,  
When every morning brought a noble chance,  
And every chance brought out a noble knight.” (Bedivere, *The Passing of Arthur*, p.251)

“For what are men better than sheep or goats  
That nourish a blind life within the brain,  
If, knowing God, they lift not hands in prayer  
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?” (Arthur, *The Passing of Arthur*,  
p.251)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. One of the obvious differences is that one account is told in verse while the other is a prose work. How do these differences in genre affect the way in which the tales are told? Which do you consider a more effective vehicle for the Arthurian legend? Why?
2. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. One of the differences is that White's novel, though written in four parts at different times, maintains narrative continuity, while Tennyson's account, written over a span of decades, is much more episodic. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches, using details from the two works to support your arguments.
3. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Choose one of the major characters – Arthur, Guinevere, or Lancelot – and discuss how that character is presented differently in the two works. Do you find any basic similarities in the personalities, motives, and even actions of the character? What conclusions can you draw about the authors' intentions from the differences you observe?
4. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. In White's story, the role of Merlin is much more prominent than is the case in Tennyson's poetic retelling. How do these choices reflect and contribute to the major themes of the two works? Support your conclusions with details from both books.
5. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Compare and contrast the treatments of war in the two works. To what extent are the differences you observe related to the eras in which the authors lived?
6. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Both works, however, give great attention to the central moral dilemma in the story – the romantic triangle involving Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. How do the two authors use this conflict to delineate their own understandings of sin and virtue? Do they agree on these matters? If not, what significant differences do you see?

7. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. How do the respective authors explain the fall of Arthur's kingdom? As you examine the causes on which they focus, evaluate their beliefs concerning what is required in order for a civilization to thrive and prosper.
8. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Discuss the motivations ascribed to Mordred (Modred for Tennyson), the villain of the legend, by the two writers. Which in your opinion provides a more convincing set of motives for the vindictive, destructive outcast? How do the differing motives contribute to the themes on which the authors seek to focus?
9. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Compare and contrast the treatments of the Quest for the Holy Grail in the two works. Consider motives, participants, and consequences in your assessment.
10. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Tennyson's work is considered a great paean to patriotism. May the same be said of White's treatment? Why or why not? Compare and contrast the two works in the ways they deal with Britain and its role in the world.
11. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Compare and contrast the way the two writers handle the story of Lancelot and Elaine, both in terms of narrative details and the motives of the characters. How do these very different treatments relate to the central themes of the two authors?
12. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Compare and contrast the endings of the two works. Which of the two gives the reader greater hope for the future of England and the world? Support your conclusion with details from the two works of literature.
13. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Both writers deal with the impact of sin on man and society, but do not focus on the same seminal sin. What is the "original sin" for Tennyson? What is it for White? How do their different choices affect their expositions of sin and its consequences? How do they influence their portrayals of the central characters?

14. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* both deal with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, but do so in very different ways. Consider, for example, the portrayal of Arthur, the central figure in the legend. Does he qualify more as a tragic hero in one treatment than in the other? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with details from both works.
15. Discuss the meaning of a true knight as presented in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Choose three important characteristics of the true knight, using three different sections of the epic to illustrate them, and explain why Tennyson considered them so vital.
16. Compare and contrast the story of Merlin and Vivien in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* with that of Samson and Delilah in Judges 16. Consider the motives of all involved, the nature of the seduction in each case, as well as the moral lessons intended by the authors.
17. Compare and contrast the story of Lancelot and Elaine in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* to the same poet's *The Lady of Shalott*. Consider not only narrative details, but also the moral and aesthetic ideas Tennyson is trying to emphasize in telling the two stories.
18. Compare and contrast two of the couples whose stories are told in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Because many parallels exist in the different narratives, many comparisons offer themselves for discussion. Be sure to choose wisely and consider how the parallels you discern contribute to the main themes of the epic cycle.
19. Compare and contrast two of the romantic triangles pictured in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. What lessons do the examples you choose seek to teach? Does one story in any way serve to illuminate the other? How?
20. Choose two characters you consider to be foils in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. What about these characters makes them literary foils? How do they illuminate one another more fully by their contrasts? How does the relationship you discern contribute to the leading themes of Tennyson's work?
21. Evaluate the treatment of Arthur in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Many critics have argued that Tennyson's Arthur is simply too pure to be real, or even interesting. Is this criticism valid? Why or why not?
22. Discuss the role of loyalty in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. How does he seek to demonstrate the importance of faithfulness to one's spouse, one's king, and one's God in the course of the tales? Be sure to cite characters, incidents, and quotations from various poems in the cycle in supporting your arguments.

23. In Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, how does the author seek to change or restore English society? Consider his use of the past, his comments about what is permanent, and his glance toward the future as you answer the question, being sure to support your conclusions with specifics from the poems.
24. Through much of Christian history, the church has sought to communicate the idea that true life can only be found through the loss of material things and the rejection of material values. How is this idea expressed in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*? Consider especially *The Passing of Arthur* in your analysis. Is his treatment of the subject biblical? Why or why not?
25. Compare and contrast the way in which the need to suffer the loss of material things in order to grow spiritually is presented in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. To what extent are the respective treatments faithful to Scripture? Support your conclusions with specifics from the two works.
26. In Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, the section dealing with Arthur's death begins with the King mourning over the failure of his kingdom. He struggles with the question of how God could have allowed evil to triumph. Compare his prayer with the response of Job to his sufferings. To what extent does he understand the nature and causes of evil in the world?
27. Alfred, Lord Tennyson once remarked to his friend, the historian Thomas Carlyle, "I don't think that since Shakespeare there has been such a master of the English language as I – to be sure, I have nothing to say." Does this assessment of Tennyson as a poet of words rather than ideas hold true in his cycle of poems about the legend of King Arthur, *Idylls of the King*? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specific quotations from the poems in the cycle.
28. Discuss the value of communication between friends and spouses as it is presented in Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Choose three examples of failed communication and discuss their consequences, both in the lives of those who are involved and among those who are close to them.
29. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the poet who penned *Idylls of the King*, was considered a master of poetic description, bringing settings to life with great vividness. Many critics have remarked that the descriptive passages of Tennyson's Arthurian cycle serve to match exterior settings with the interior landscape of the characters, further illuminating their mental and emotional states. Choose three descriptive passages from *Idylls of the King*, being sure to choose them from different sections, and discuss the ways in which the settings illuminate the inner experiences of the leading characters.

30. Though Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* consists of narrative fragments in poetic form rather than a continuous narrative, life changes that occur in key characters play an important role in the work. Choose three examples of "conversions" from three different poems in the cycle and discuss how the incidents of change or enlightenment contribute to the overall themes of Tennyson's retelling of the Arthurian legend.
31. In lines 9-28 of *The Passing of Arthur* in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Arthur struggles with the collapse of his kingdom, and more broadly with the problem of evil. How does Tennyson answer the problem he has raised through the words of Arthur? Is his answer a biblical one? Why or why not?
32. In lines 9-28 of *The Passing of Arthur* in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Arthur struggles with the collapse of his kingdom, and more broadly with the problem of evil. Compare Tennyson's treatment of the subject with that of T.H. White in the conversation between Arthur and Merlin near the end of *The Once and Future King*. Do the two writers give the same answer to the classic dilemma? Which approach is more biblical? If neither is, explain why not?
33. In lines 9-28 of *The Passing of Arthur* in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Arthur struggles with the collapse of his kingdom, and more broadly with the problem of evil. Compare and contrast the way in which the question is approached by Tennyson with that found in Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*. Which of Arthur's proposed explanations is closest to that proposed by Pope? Do the two finally settle on the same answer? Why or why not?
34. In lines 9-28 of *The Passing of Arthur* in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Arthur struggles with the collapse of his kingdom, and more broadly with the problem of evil. Is Tennyson's work, like that of Milton in *Paradise Lost*, intended to "justify the ways of God to man"? Why or why not? Are their approaches to the question the same? If not, how are they different?
35. In Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, to what extent may King Arthur be described as a Christ figure? In your discussion, include both ways in which he serves as a picture of Christ and ways in which he does not. Be specific.
36. In Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, the segment *Balin and Balan* was written in 1885, the same year in which Robert Louis Stevenson was producing *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Compare and contrast the two accounts. What do both say about human nature and the struggle between moral values and inner depravity? Use specifics from both stories in answering the question.
37. Discuss the connection between marital union and political union in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. In what sense do Arthur's marriage and Arthur's kingdom run along parallel courses? In what ways do they affect one another? What do you think Tennyson is trying to say through this parallel structure?

38. The original title of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* was *The True and the False*. In what way is this a suitable title for the poems that make up Tennyson's Arthurian epic cycle? Pay special attention to the structures of the narratives that make up the central portion of the work, as well as the emphasis on moral questions and the nature of good and evil.
39. Alfred, Lord Tennyson intended his *Idylls of the King* to present a picture of Victorian England. What similarities do you see between the mythical kingdom of Arthur and the realm of Queen Victoria? Consider leading characteristics of the Victorian Age, especially with regard to struggles between belief and unbelief, morality and license, and a noble kingdom being eroded from within that appear in the epic.
40. In the segment of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* entitled *Geraint and Enid*, the poet pens these words: "O purblind race of miserable men, / How many among us at this very hour / Do forge a lifelong trouble for ourselves, / By taking true for false, or false for true." Discuss the lessons Tennyson seeks to convey concerning the dangers of self-imposed blindness. Are the lessons he teaches biblical? Be sure to incorporate incidents and quotations from other parts of the epic in addition to the one cited above.
41. In the segment of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* entitled *Lancelot and Elaine*, Guinevere speaks these words: "He is all fault who hath no fault at all. / For who loves me must have a touch of earth." Analyze this quotation from multiple perspectives. Is Arthur as he is portrayed by Tennyson too good to be true? Is someone who is to all outward appearances flawless, or nearly so, therefore unable to relate meaningfully to others (consider Galahad as well in answering this question)? Is Guinevere simply rationalizing her infatuation with Lancelot?
42. The character of the Wise Fool is commonplace in literature. Compare and contrast Arthur's jester Dagonet in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* to the Fool in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Do the two characters speak the truth in the same way? How do they influence their masters? How do they elucidate key themes in the two stories?
43. In *The Last Tournament*, near the end of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Dagonet the jester says, "Ay, ay, my brother fool, the king of fools! / Conceits himself as God that he can make / Figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk / From burning spurge, honey from hornet-combs, / And men from beasts – Long live the king of fools!" What is the point of the jester's words? To what extent was Arthur foolish to try to build an ideal society in Camelot? How do Dagonet's words apply to any utopian social experiment? Why would Scripture lead us to the same conclusion reached by the jester?

44. In *Guinevere*, near the end of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, the Queen speaks these words: "What might I not have made of thy fair world, / Had I but loved thy highest creature here? / It was my duty to have loved the highest; / It surely was my profit had I known; / It would have been my pleasure had I seen. / We needs must love the highest when we see it, / Not Lancelot, nor another." Do these lines contain a deeper meaning that goes beyond her duty to Arthur and her role in the fall of Camelot? Consider the nature of that deeper meaning, especially in the light of the teachings of Scripture. Is that deeper meaning consistent with the themes of Tennyson's poem? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specifics from the epic as well as appropriate passages of Scripture.
45. In *The Passing of Arthur* at the end of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Sir Bedivere says, "For now I see the true old times are dead, / When every morning brought a noble chance, / And every chance brought out a noble knight." To what extent is the faithful knight's conviction that the Golden Age is gone forever reflective of Tennyson's concerns for the society of Victorian England? What did he see around him that made him fear inevitable decline? How are these fears reflected in his Arthurian epic?
46. In *The Passing of Arthur* at the end of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, King Arthur says, "For what are men better than sheep or goats / That nourish a blind life within the brain, / If, knowing God, they lift not hands in prayer / Both for themselves and those who call them friend?" Discuss the nature of true manhood as presented by Tennyson in his epic poem. What differentiates man from beast? Be sure to support your arguments with examples from different sections of the cycle. Do his ideas correspond with the teachings of the Bible on the same question? Why or why not?