

## Before You Read

### THE DEATH OF ARTHUR

#### Make the Connection

##### Heroes That Never Die

People have always hated to let go of their heroes. In fact, many cultures tell stories in which the hero promises to return in an hour of need to help the people once again. How do we try to keep our heroes alive? We build statues to them and record their portraits on canvas, coins, and film. But most of all we tell those stories—stories that we hope will keep our heroes and their values alive in the memories of future generations.

#### Elements of Literature

##### The Romance Hero

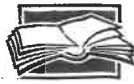
Malory's Arthur is in many ways the archetypal, or typical, romance hero. He is born under mysterious circumstances, grows up in obscurity, and undergoes a childhood initiation involving a magic weapon. In his maturity he fights to defeat evil and promote peace. Throughout his life he is aided by magic weapons and wise mentors. Mysterious events surround his departure from this world, suggesting that he may return when his people need him the most.

If you remember your old myths and fairy tales, you'll recognize these elements of Arthur's story. Even movies and cartoons today use these archetypes of the romance hero. (Check out the story of Superman's origins.)

170 THE MIDDLE AGES

**A** romance hero is a larger-than-life figure who usually has mysterious origins and in the course of his life performs extraordinary deeds with the aid of magic forces.

#### Reading Skills and Strategies



##### Using Context Clues

Malory tells his story of Arthur in the language of the fifteenth century, which is full of archaic expressions. When we say a word is **archaic**, we mean it is not in use. Many of the archaic words in the story are footnoted. When you come across other archaic words that are strange to you, search each word's context—the words surrounding it—to see if you can find a clue to its meaning. It is in part the strangeness of the archaic language that gives this story its magic. "Oddly enough," the American writer John Steinbeck

once said of Malory's tales, "I knew the words from whispering them to myself."

#### Background

Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* contains a series of tales about the birth, education, adventures, and death (or disappearance) of King Arthur. In the early tales, Arthur persuades his knights to unite in the fellowship of the Round Table and dedicate themselves to the chivalric code of honor. For a while, Arthur's vision is realized, and justice prevails in the kingdom. But human frailties, including Arthur's own, gradually corrupt the fellowship of the Round Table. Worst, perhaps, is the betrayal of Lancelot, Arthur's best knight, who falls in love with Queen Guinevere. Arthur and his Round Table become vulnerable to evil forces, personified by Sir Mordred, who is Arthur's illegitimate son.

In the last episode of Malory's manuscript, Arthur meets his wicked son in battle.

Arthur mortally wounded, from *Roman du Saint Graal* (early 14th century). Add. 10294 fol. 93.



British Art Library, London.

# The Death of Arthur

## from *Le Morte Darthur*

### Sir Thomas Malory

So upon Trinity Sunday at night king Arthur dreamed a wonderful dream. And in his dream him seemed that he saw upon a chafflet<sup>1</sup> a chair, and the chair was fast to a wheel, and thereupon sat king Arthur in the richest cloth of gold that might be made. And the king thought there was under him, far from him, an hideous deep black water, and therein was all manner of serpents and worms and wild beasts foul and horrible. And suddenly the king thought that the wheel turned up-so-down, and he fell among the serpents, and every beast took him by a limb. And then the king cried as he lay in his bed, "Help! help!" and then knights, squires and yeomen awaked the king, and then he was so amazed that he wist not where he was.

And then so he awaked until it was nigh day, and then he fell on slumbering again, not sleeping nor thoroughly waking. So the king seemed verily that there came sir Gawain unto him with a number of fair ladies with him. So when king Arthur saw him he said, "Welcome, my sister's son, I weened ye had been dead! And now I see thee on live, much am I beholden unto Almighty Jesu. Ah, fair nephew, what been these ladies that hither be come with you?"

"Sir," said sir Gawain, "all these be ladies for whom I have foughten for, when I was man living. And all these are tho<sup>2</sup> that I did battle for in righteous quarrels, and God hath given them that grace at their great prayer, because I did battle for them for their right, that they should bring me hither unto you. Thus much hath given me leave God for to warn you of your death: for and ye fight as to-morn<sup>3</sup> with sir Mordred, as ye both have assigned, doubt ye not ye shall be slain, and the most party of your people on both parties.<sup>4</sup> And for the great grace and goodness that Almighty

Jesu hath unto you, and for pity of you and many mo<sup>5</sup> other good men there shall be slain, God hath sent me to you of his special grace to give you warning that in no wise ye do battle as to-morn, but that ye take a treatise<sup>6</sup> for a month day. And proffer you largely,<sup>7</sup> so that to-morn ye put in a delay. For within a month shall come sir Lancelot with all his noble knights, and rescue you worshipfully and slay sir Mordred and all that ever will hold with him."

Then sir Gawain and all the ladies vanished, and anon the king called upon his knights, squires, and yeomen, and charged them wightly<sup>8</sup> to fetch his noble lords and wise bishops unto him. And when they were come the king told them of his avision,<sup>9</sup> that sir Gawain had told him and warned him that and<sup>10</sup> he fought on the morn, he should be slain. Then the king commanded sir Lucan the Butler and his brother sir Bedivere the Bold, with two bishops with them, and charged them in any wise to take a treatise for a month day with sir Mordred: "And spare not. Proffer him lands and goods as much as ye think reasonable."

So then they departed and came to sir Mordred where he had a grim host of an hundred thousand men, and there they entreated sir Mordred long time. And at the last sir Mordred was agreed for to have Cornwall and Kent by king Arthur's days; and after that all England, after the days of king Arthur.

Then were they condescend<sup>11</sup> that king Arthur and sir Mordred should meet betwixt both their hosts, and every of them should bring fourteen persons. And so they came with this word unto Arthur. Then said he, "I am glad that this is done." And so he went into the field.

1. **chafflet:** scaffold.

2. **tho:** those.

3. **for . . . to-morn:** if you fight tomorrow.

4. **most . . . parties:** most part of your people on both sides.

5. **mo:** more.

6. **treatise:** treaty or truce.

7. **proffer you largely:** make generous offers.

8. **wightly:** quickly.

9. **avision:** dream.

10. **and:** if.

11. **condescend:** agreed.

And when king Arthur should depart he warned all his host that and they see any sword drawn, "look ye come on fiercely and slay that traitor, sir Mordred, for I in no wise trust him." In like wise sir Mordred warned his host "that and ye see any manner of sword drawn, look that ye come on fiercely and so slay all that ever before you standeth, for in no wise I will not trust for this treatise." And in the same wise said sir Mordred unto his host: "for I know well my father will be avenged upon me."

And so they met as their appointment was, and were agreed and accorded thoroughly. And wine was fetched, and they drank together. Right so came out an adder of a little heath bush, and it stung a knight in the foot. And so when the knight felt him so stung, he looked down and saw the adder; and anon he drew his sword to slay the adder, and thought none other harm. And when the host on both parties saw that sword drawn, then they blew bemes,<sup>12</sup> trumpets and horns, and shouted grimly, and so both hosts dressed them<sup>13</sup> together. And king Arthur took his horse and said, "Alas, this unhappy day!" and so rode to his party, and sir Mordred in like wise.

And never since was there never seen a more dolefuller battle in no Christian land, for there was but rushing and riding, foining<sup>14</sup> and striking, and many a grim word was there spoken of either to other, and many a deadly stroke. But ever king Arthur rode throughout the battle<sup>15</sup> of sir Mordred many times and did full nobly, as a noble king should do, and at all times he fainted never. And sir Mordred did his devoir<sup>16</sup> that day and put himself in great peril.

And thus they fought all the long day, and never stinted till the noble knights were laid to the cold earth. And ever they fought still till it was near night, and by then was there an hundred thousand laid dead upon the earth. Then was king Arthur wood wroth<sup>17</sup> out of measure, when he saw his people so slain from him. And so he looked about him and could see no mo of all his host and good

12. **bemes:** bugles.

13. **dressed them:** prepared to come.

14. **foining:** lunging.

15. **battle:** battalion.

16. **devoir:** knightly duty.

17. **wood wroth:** mad with rage.

knights left, no mo on live but two knights: t'one was sir Lucan de Butler and his brother sir Bedivere; and yet they were full sore wounded.

"Jesu mercy!" said the king, "where are all my noble knights become? Alas, that ever I should see this doleful day! For now," said king Arthur, "I am come to mine end. But would to God," said he, "that I wist now where were that traitor sir Mordred that hath caused all this mischief."

Then king Arthur looked about and was ware where stood sir Mordred leaning upon his sword among a great heap of dead men. "Now, give me my spear," said king Arthur unto sir Lucan, "for yonder I have espied the traitor that all this woe hath wrought."

"Sir, let him be," said sir Lucan, "for he is unhappy.<sup>18</sup> And if ye pass this unhappy day ye shall be right well revenged upon him. Good lord, remember ye of your night's dream and what the spirit of sir Gawain told you to-night, and yet God of His great goodness hath preserved you hitherto. And for God's sake, my lord, leave off this, for, blessed be God, ye have won the field. For yet we been here three on live, and with Sir Mordred is not one of live. And therefore if ye leave off now, this wicked day of Destiny is past!"

"Now tide<sup>19</sup> me death, tide me life," said the king, "now I see him yonder alone, he shall never escape mine hands! For at a better avail shall I never have him."

"God speed you well!" said sir Bedivere.

Then the king got his spear in both his hands, and ran toward sir Mordred, crying and saying, "Traitor, now is thy death-day come!"

And when sir Mordred saw king Arthur he ran until him with his sword drawn in his hand, and there king Arthur smote sir Mordred under the shield, with a foin of his spear, throughout the body more than a fathom. And when sir Mordred felt that he had his death's wound he thrust himself with the might that he had up to the burr of king Arthur's spear, and right so he smote his father, king Arthur, with his sword holding in both his hands, upon the side of the head, that the sword pierced the helmet and the tay<sup>20</sup> of the

18. **unhappy:** unlucky for you.

19. **tide:** betide.

20. **tay:** edge.

brain. And therewith Mordred dashed down stark dead to the earth.

And noble king Arthur fell in a swough to the earth, and there he swooned oftentimes, and sir Lucan and sir Bedivere oft-times hove him up. And so weakly betwixt them they led him to a little chapel not far from the sea, and when the king was there, him thought him reasonably eased.

Then heard they people cry in the field. "Now go thou, sir Lucan" said the king, "and do me to wit<sup>21</sup> what betokens that noise in the field." So sir Lucan departed, for he was grievously wounded in many places. And so as he yode<sup>22</sup> he saw and hearkened by the moonlight how that pillers<sup>23</sup> and robbers were come into the field to pill and to rob many a full noble knight of brooches and bees<sup>24</sup> and of many a good ring and many a rich jewel. And who that were not dead all out, there they slew them for their harness and their riches.

When sir Lucan understood this work he came to the king as soon as he might, and told him all what he had heard and seen. "Therefore by my rede,"<sup>25</sup> said sir Lucan, "it is best that we bring you to some town."

"I would it were so," said the king, "but I may not stand, my head works so. Ah, sir Lancelot!" said king Arthur, "this day have I sore missed thee! And alas, that ever I was against thee! For now have I my death, whereof sir Gawain me warned in my dream."

Then sir Lucan took up the king t'one party and sir Bedivere the other party. And in the lifting up the king swooned, and in the lifting sir Lucan fell in a swoon, that part of his guts fell out of his body, and therewith the noble knight his heart burst. And when the king awoke he beheld sir Lucan, how he lay foaming at the mouth and part of his guts lay at his feet.

"Alas," said the king, "this is to me a full heavy sight, to see this noble duke so die for my sake, for he would have holpen me that had more need of help than I! Alas, that he would not complain him, for his heart was so set to help me. Now Jesu have mercy upon his soul!"

21. **do me to wit:** let me know.

22. **yode:** walked.

23. **pillers:** plunderers.

24. **bees:** bracelets.

25. **rede:** advice.



Bedivere returning Excalibur to the lake upon the death of Arthur, from *Roman du Saint Graal* (early 14th century). Add. 10294 fol. 94.

British Art Library, London.

Then sir Bedivere wept for the death of his brother.

"Now leave this mourning and weeping, gentle knight," said the king, "for all this will not avail me. For wit thou well, and I might live myself, the death of sir Lucan would grieve me evermore. But my time hieth fast," said the king. "Therefore," said king Arthur unto sir Bedivere, "take thou here Excaliber,<sup>26</sup> my good sword, and go with it to yonder water's side. And when thou comest there, I charge thee throw my sword in that water, and come again and tell me what thou seest there."

"My lord," said sir Bedivere, "your commandment shall be done, and lightly<sup>27</sup> bring you word again." So sir Bedivere departed. And by the way

26. **Excaliber:** Arthur's sword, given to him by the mysterious Lady of the Lake.

27. **lightly:** quickly.

he beheld that noble sword, and the pommel and the haft was all precious stones. And then he said to himself, "If I throw this rich sword in the water, thereof shall never come good, but harm and loss." And then sir Bedivere hid Excaliber under a tree. And so as soon as he might he came again unto the king and said he had been at the water and had thrown the sword into the water.

"What saw thou there?" said the king.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waves and winds."

"That is untruly said of thee," said the king, "and therefore go thou lightly again, and do my commandment. As thou art to me lief<sup>28</sup> and dear, spare not, but throw it in."

Then sir Bedivere returned again and took the sword in his hand; and yet him thought sin and shame to throw away that noble sword. And so eft<sup>29</sup> he hid the sword and returned again and told the king that he had been at the water and done his commandment.

"What sawest thou there?" said the king.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waters wap and waves wan."

"Ah, traitor unto me and untrue," said king Arthur, "now hast thou betrayed me twice! Who would ween that thou that hast been to me so lief and dear, and also named so noble a knight, that thou would betray me for the riches of this sword? But now go again lightly; for thy long tarrying putteth me in great jeopardy of my life, for I have taken cold. And but if thou do now as I bid thee, if ever I may see thee, I shall slay thee mine own hands, for thou wouldst for my rich sword see me dead."

Then sir Bedivere departed and went to the sword and lightly took it up, and so he went unto the water's side. And there he bound the girdle about the hilts, and threw the sword as far into the water as he might. And there came an arm and an hand above the water, and took it and cleight it, and shook it thrice and brandished, and then vanished with the sword into the water.

So sir Bedivere came again to the king and told him what he saw. "Alas," said the king, "help me hence, for I dread me I have tarried over long."

28. lief: beloved.

29. eft: again.

Then sir Bedivere took the king upon his back and so went with him to the water's side. And when they were there, even fast by the bank hoved a little barge with many fair ladies in it, and among them all was a queen, and all they had black hoods. And all they wept and shrieked when they saw king Arthur.

"Now put me into that barge," said the king. And so he did softly, and there received him three ladies with great mourning. And so they set them down, and in one of their laps king Arthur laid his head.

And then the queen said, "Ah, my dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me? Alas, this wound on your head hath caught over much cold!" And anon they rowed fromward the land, and sir Bedivere beheld all tho ladies go froward him. Then sir Bedivere cried and said,

"Ah, my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies?"

"Comfort thyself," said the king, "and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to trust in. For I must into the vale of Avilion<sup>30</sup> to heal me of my grievous wound. And if thou hear nevermore of me, pray for my soul!"

But ever the queen and ladies wept and shrieked that it was pity to hear. And as soon as sir Bedivere had lost the sight of the barge he wept and wailed, and so took<sup>31</sup> the forest and went all that night.

And in the morning he was ware, betwixt two holts hoar,<sup>32</sup> of a chapel and an hermitage. Then was sir Bedivere fain, and thither he went, and when he came into the chapel he saw where lay an hermit groveling on all fours, fast thereby a tomb was new graven. When the hermit saw sir Bedivere he knew him well, for he was but little tofore Bishop of Canterbury that sir Mordred flemed.<sup>33</sup>

"Sir," said sir Bedivere, "what man is there here interred that ye pray so fast for?"

"Fair son," said the hermit, "I wot not verily but by deeming. But this same night, at midnight,

30. Avilion: legendary island, sometimes identified with the earthly Paradise.

31. took: took to.

32. holts hoar: old thickets.

33. flemed: banished.

here came a number of ladies and brought here a dead corpse and prayed me to inter him. And here they offered an hundred tapers, and they gave me a thousand besants.”<sup>34</sup>

“Alas,” said sir Bedivere, “that was my lord king Arthur, which lieth here graven in this chapel.” Then sir Bedivere swooned. And when he awoke he prayed the hermit that he might abide with him still, there to live with fasting and prayers: “For from hence will I never go,” said sir Bedivere, “by my will, but all the days of my life here to pray for my lord Arthur.”

“Sir, ye are welcome to me,” said the hermit, “for I know you better than ye ween that I do: for ye are sir Bedivere the Bold, and the full noble duke sir Lucan de Butler was your brother.” Then sir Bedivere told the hermit all as ye have heard tofore, and so he beleft with the hermit that was beforehand Bishop of Canterbury. And there sir Bedivere put upon him poor clothes, and served the hermit full lowly in fasting and in prayers.

Thus of Arthur I find no more written in books that been authorized, nother more of the very certainty of his death heard I never read. But thus was he led away in a ship wherein were three queens; that one was king Arthur sister, queen Morgan le Fay, the tother was queen of North Wales, and the third was the queen of the Waste

34. **besants:** *bezants*, gold coins of Byzantium.



Lands. Also there was dame Ninive, the chief lady of the lake, which had wedded sir Pelleas, the good knight; and this lady had done much for king Arthur. And this dame Ninive would never suffer sir Pelleas to be in no place where he should be in danger of his life, and so he lived unto the uttermost of his days with her in great rest.

Now more of the death of king Arthur could I never find, but that these ladies brought him to his grave, and such one was interred there which the hermit bore witness that sometime was Bishop of Canterbury. But yet the hermit knew not in certain that he was verily the body of king Arthur; for this tale sir Bedivere, a knight of the Table Round, made it to be written.

Yet some men say in many parts of England that king Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place. And men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the Holy Cross.<sup>35</sup> Yet I will not say that it shall be so; but rather I would say: here in this world he changed his life. And many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse:

HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS.<sup>36</sup>

And thus leave I here sir Bedivere with the hermit that dwelled that time in a chapel besides Glastonbury, and there was his hermitage. And so they lived in prayers and fastings and great abstinence.

And when queen Guenevere understood that king Arthur was dead and all the noble knights, sir Mordred and all the remnant, then she stole away with five ladies with her, and so she went to Amesbury. And there she let make herself a nun, and weared white clothes and black, and great penance she took upon her, as ever did sinful woman in this land. And never creature could make her merry, but ever she lived in fasting, prayers, and alms-deeds, that all manner of people marvelled how virtuously she was changed.

35. **Holy Cross:** cross on which Jesus was crucified.

36. Latin for “Here lies Arthur, the once and future king.”

*Head of a Woman* (c. 1450) by Pesellino.

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