

Meet T.H. White



"The Destiny of Man is to unite, not to divide. If you keep on dividing you end up as a collection of monkeys throwing nuts at each other out of separate trees."

– T.H. White

Terence Hanbury White was born on May 29, 1906, in Bombay, India. His father, Garrick Hanbury White, a district superintendent of police, and his mother, Constance White, had a tempestuous marriage. White's mother, who was considered beautiful, had been berated by her own mother for being unmarried at almost thirty. In response she swore she would marry the next man who asked her. She did, and the result was a disaster.

When he was five, White's parents placed him in school in England. They returned to India (and to their quarreling) while Terence--Tim, as his friends later called him--lived with his mother's parents, the Astons. When he was seventeen, his parents finally divorced, and even though his family life had never been good, White was devastated. An only child, White continued to feel alone and insecure throughout his life.

To escape the sadness of his personal life, White turned to learning, just as Merlyn advises the young Arthur to do in *The Sword in the Stone*: "The best thing for being sad...is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails." White was a brilliant student at Queen's College, Cambridge, taking first class honors with distinction in English. He was later appointed head of the English department at Stowe School. Learning, for

White, was clearly not confined to books. During a tour of America near the end of his life, White often delivered a lecture, "The Pleasures of Learning," in which he would list all the things he had learned to do. The list included archery, carpentry, knitting, flying airplanes, riding show horses, and training falcons.

Most of all, White wanted to learn to write. In 1936, he resigned his teaching position to devote his full attention to writing. Since his college days, White had been interested in Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte d'Arthur*, which recounts the story of King Arthur and his knights, and he now began writing his own work based on Malory's material. The publication and success of his first novel, *The Sword in the Stone*, gave White the financial independence to continue. To escape the coming war, he moved to Ireland, where he devoted himself to hunting, fishing, falconry, and developing his Arthurian novels.

The books came quickly. *The Witch in the Wood* (later rewritten as *The Queen of Air and Darkness*) was published in 1939 and was followed by *The Ill-Made Knight* in 1940. He finished *The Candle in the Wind* by 1941, but did not publish it until its inclusion in *The Once and Future King*--a collection of White's first four Arthurian tales--in 1958. *The Book of Merlyn*, also completed by 1941, was omitted from that collection and published posthumously in 1977.

Between 1940 and 1958, White continued to write, publishing the fairly successful *Mistress Masham's Repose*; *The Goshawk* (1951), a nonfiction account of his attempt to train a falcon; *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* (1954), a translation from the Latin; and other books. Yet White's powers seemed to have faded, and he never wrote anything that matched the power of his Arthurian novels.

In 1958, the publication of *The Once and Future King*, a best seller in both the United States and England, revived White's popularity. The saga's 1960 stage production as *Camelot* made White not only a wealthy man but a celebrity, and resulted in a successful speaking tour of the United States.

While on a Mediterranean cruise, the fifty-seven-year-old White suffered a fatal heart attack and died on January 17, 1964, in Piraeus, Greece--some thirteen years before the publication of *The Book of Merlyn*. He is buried in Athens, within sight of Hadrian's Arch and the Temple of Zeus.

Introducing the Novel

White's modern retelling of the story of King Arthur and his knights presents the reader with an extremely full range of literary experiences. *The Once and Future King* contains entertaining comic episodes and moments of the highest tragedy; it deals with profound philosophical issues and, at the same time, offers exciting action. The principal characters—Arthur, Lancelot, Guenever, and Merlyn—are heroic, but White takes care to portray their human flaws as well as their attributes. As a result, they are believable people, with whom readers can identify.

The Once and Future King is an engrossing story and an excellent introduction to one of the most important legends in English literature. The Arthurian legend is often referred to as “the matter of Britain,” and many critics consider it—along with the King James Bible and the work of Shakespeare and Milton—one of the four cornerstones of English literature and culture.

White's title, *The Once and Future King*, is drawn from the epitaph attributed to Arthur's tomb by the medieval English writer Sir Thomas Malory: “And many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: *Hic iacet Arthurs, rex quodam, rexque futurus*” (Here lies Arthur, king once and king to be). White's use of this quotation is appropriate, because he is, in a sense, translating Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* for modern readers. Malory wrote in fifteenth-century English, a language that many readers would find difficult to understand. White's book is not strictly a translation of the *Morte d'Arthur*, however, but rather a modern retelling of the story of Arthur. White infuses the material with his own concerns and philosophy of life. In his turn, he is doing what Malory did when that author compiled the French romances of King Arthur and produced an English version.

Throughout literary history different generations have interpreted the story of King Arthur in their own ways. Historically, Arthur was probably a Briton (Celtic) warlord who fought to repulse Saxon invaders around A.D. 460; for Nennius, a church historian writing around 800, Arthur is a Christian king who carries the banner of the Blessed Virgin into battle; for the Welsh minstrels of the twelfth century, he is a mythical hero who takes on some of the attributes of their ancient Celtic gods; for Geoffrey of Monmouth, around 1140, Arthur is the High King who unites England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and who challenges Rome. The French, with their interest in royalty and courtly love, add The Round Table, and in 1190 the French author Chrétien de Troyes adds the love affair of Lancelot and Guenever. Around 1220, the Cistercian monks develop the legend of the Holy Grail. But it was Malory who turned Arthur into the King of Chivalry, and turned his legend into the foundation of English literature that it remains today.

Modern writers, too, have seen Arthur in the mirror of their own times. For example, the nineteenth-century British poet Alfred Tennyson turned Arthur into a Victorian gentleman in his poem, “Morte d'Arthur.” Thus White continues a long literary tradition when he makes Arthur confront the problems of the twentieth century. White created his Arthurian novels between 1937 and 1941, and the concern most on his mind was war. World War II was destroying Europe, and although he lived in neutral Ireland, White could not escape the fear generated by the war.

Malory wrote about his Arthur during the War of the Roses, and White finally came to believe that the central theme of the *Morte d'Arthur* was the need to find an antidote to war. In his attempt to find this antidote, Arthur examines the relationship of humankind to the animals, the workings of justice, and other philosophical questions about the nature of civilization. The tragedy of Arthur is that philosophy provides no answers. The evil in the world lives inside the hearts of those he loves best, Lancelot and Guenever, in his own heart, and, finally, in the hearts of all people.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The Once and Future King is set during the Dark Ages, about 1200, in England, which Arthur calls Gramarye. Most historians think the actual Arthur—if there was one—lived much earlier, probably during the fifth century. Even though White presents a great many details about life in medieval England, he intentionally mentions modern things that could not possibly have existed at the time of the story, such as cannons and top hats. He uses **anachronism** partially for humorous effect, but also to demonstrate that the human problems of the Dark Ages were similar to the problems of the twentieth century.

SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Because White's purpose was to show the cruelty of war and the evils of humanity, there is a great deal of fighting and lopping off of heads in the book. Additionally, White's use of cruelty to animals as a device to reveal the villainy of his evil characters may disturb some readers. Queen Morgause boils a cat in an attempt to find a magical bone, and her sons brutally betray a unicorn and sever its head. However, these actions—appearing as they do in a book that celebrates the beauties of nature—are clearly used to establish certain characters as excessively vicious and depraved.

Kinzey, James Reynolds. “*The Once and Future King*.” *Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults*. Ed. Kirk H. Beetz and Suzanne Niemeyer. Vol. 4. Washington, D.C.: Beacham Publishing, Inc., 1990. 1888-1896. Web. 12 Feb. 2016.

