

## Book two: The Queen of Air and Darkness

### Chapter 1

1. How is Queen Morgause characterized in this chapter?

*Morgause is characterized as cruel, uncaring toward her children, and vain. The scene in which she boils the cat alive contributes greatly to her characterization. She boils the cat in an attempt to become invisible, but ends up abandoning the attempt when she becomes bored with it. The cat's death is described as rather awful; it goes into "horrible convulsions" and emits "a dreadful cry." The fact that Morgause subjects the creature to such torture and then does not even finish attempting her magic with the creature's bones indicates how cruel she is. Additionally, she is indifferent toward her children, despite their love for her. Lastly, she is characterized as beautiful but quite vain, enjoying her attempt at magic mostly because it gives her an excuse to gaze at her reflection in the mirror.*

2. What does this chapter foreshadow? How does the quotation beginning this book relate to this foreshadowing?

*The Orkney children spend the majority of this chapter telling the story of a great wrong that was done to their family by King Uther Pendragon (who the reader now knows is Arthur's father). The children's tone towards Uther Pendragon is outright hatred. At the end of the story, Gawaine tells his brothers: "And this, my heroes ... is the reason why we of Cornwall and Orkney must be against the Kings of England ever more, and most of all against the clan Mac Pendragon." This obviously foreshadows the trouble that will arise between Arthur and this Orkney clan, as the Orkneys swear vengeance.*

*The quotation beginning the book relates to the idea of family guilt. The Orkneys swear vengeance against Arthur solely because of the sins of Arthur's father. The quotation has a foreboding, inevitable tone, indicating that perhaps Arthur will never be "rid of the wrong [his] father did."*

3. How has the tone shifted in this book from the tone of book one?

*This beginning chapter of book two has a markedly different tone than book one. From the rather disquieting quotation beginning it, to the oath of vengeance, to the horrible characterization of Morgause, the tone has shifted from lighthearted overall to foreboding and weighty.*

## Chapter 2

1. How does Arthur and Merlyn's conversation further develop the theme of might and right?

*King Arthur expresses pleasure at his recent victory in battle, calling it a "jolly battle," seemingly oblivious to the seven hundred common people (kerns) who were killed. Merlyn is quick to chastise him for this oversight, pointing out that war is much more dangerous for the common man than for knights, who are encased in armor that protects them from virtually all injuries. Merlyn's point is simple but important: Arthur must think of the cost of battle to the people as well as to himself.*

*Arthur asks: "Might isn't Right, is it, Merlyn?" Merlyn does not give him a direct answer, but it is clear that the idea has been planted in Arthur's mind. Merlyn has convinced Arthur to see the injustice and brutality of war, rather than only the enjoyment the knights get out of it.*

2. How is the adult Arthur characterized in this chapter?

*The author characterizes King Arthur as extremely naïve in this chapter, describing his face as "stupid" because of its lack of cunning. Indeed, Arthur speaks of the recent battle as if it were a game rather than a matter of life and death, revealing a curiously childish outlook. The chapter ends with a description of Arthur's frame of mind: "So far as he was concerned, as yet, there might never have been such a thing as a single particle of sorrow on the gay, sweet surface of the dew-glittering world."*

*Further, the scene in which Arthur appears to be contemplating dropping a stone on Curselaine's head characterizes him further. It is important that he makes the decision not to drop the stone and kill the servant, despite the fact that he is the King and could surely get away with it if he wished to.*

## Chapter 3

1. How does Merlyn's long explanation of the reasons behind the war advance the plot?

*Merlyn's exposition serves two purposes. First, it decisively connects the discussion among the Orkney faction from chapter one to King Arthur's current political situation. Second, it explains that the conflict between the Gaels and Normans and Saxons dates back thousands of years, demonstrating that warfare is a way of life during this period of time. The reader can be sure to expect battle between the two groups, given Merlyn's description of their long hostilities. Additionally, Merlyn's comments, particularly his last one, demonstrate that he is still attempting to guide Arthur towards an understanding that war should be avoided if possible.*

## Chapter 4

1. How does the argument about aggression between Kay and Merlyn develop their characters?

*Kay presents Merlyn with difficult hypothetical situations in an effort to undermine Merlyn's argument that warfare should be avoided except in self-defense. This rather obstinate attitude of Kay's further establishes him as a more simple-minded character than either Merlyn or even Arthur. Kay enjoys his knightly fighting, and so is attempting to argue in favor of warfare.*

*Merlyn, on the other hand, feels strongly that warfare—or at least the aggressive behavior that begins wars—is an absolute evil. He argues with more common sense than Kay and is successful in making his point to Arthur about aggression.*

2. How does Merlyn characterize King Lot? What might this foreshadow?

*Merlyn characterizes King Lot as a ruler who enjoys warring, either for profit or pleasure. He compares Lot to a foxhunter, and points out that he cares nothing at all for the plight of the common soldier, who is far more likely to be injured and killed in a battle than any knights or kings are.*

*Additionally, Merlyn calls King Lot a “cipher,” acknowledging that he does things only when his wife, Queen Morgause, tells him to. This might foreshadow additional trouble for Arthur from King Lot's armies, since it is Queen Morgause and her children who hold such a grudge against him.*

## Chapter 5

1. Are there parallels between Sir Toirdealbhach and Merlyn? What effect do these parallels create?

*Sir Toirdealbhach serves as a kind of mentor to the Orkney children, much like Merlyn serves as a mentor to Arthur and Kay in the preceding chapters. This parallel is made especially clear when Sir Toirdealbhach begins speaking of wars. Unlike Merlyn, Sir Toirdealbhach is not morally opposed to wars and does not preach against them to the children. Instead, he recalls war as “the grand thing,” and laments only that modern wars involve too many people.*

*These parallels are made especially evident because Sir Toirdealbhach's lesson on war directly follows the chapters in which Merlyn teaches lessons on war. This parallel serves to illuminate the vast difference in upbringing and moral teaching that the Orkney children experience compared to King Arthur.*

2. How does this chapter further develop the characters of the Orkney children?

*The Orkney children are a strange lot. This chapter reveals them to be relatively bloodthirsty children. As they discuss warfare with Sir Toirdealbhach, Gawaine and Agravaire argue that the more people involved in a war, the better, because large numbers give more opportunities to kill.*

*Later, they beat the donkeys mercilessly as they make their trek toward the beach. They are aware that they are hurting the donkeys, but seem not to care in the least. However, the author is not depicting them as cruel and heartless; the characterization is more ambiguous. Although they are intentionally harming the donkeys, the author is careful to note: "Nobody had told them it was cruel to hurt them." They are depicted more as a lawless, confused bunch than an evil bunch, presumably because of their mother's indifference towards them.*

3. How does this chapter advance the plot of the novel?

*The magic barge that approaches the shore at the end of this chapter serves to drive the plot forward. The three knights in the barge are knights under King Arthur's rule, and are completely oblivious to the fact that they are at war with the Gaels, whose shore they just landed upon. The chapter ends as the knights notice the Gaels staring at them, serving to build tension as the reader wonders how the two groups will respond to each other.*

## Chapter 6

1. How does this chapter represent a turning point for King Arthur? For Merlyn?

*In this chapter, it becomes clear that Arthur has fully learned and understood the lessons Merlyn has been attempting to teach him since his childhood, and it becomes clear that, as king, he is committed to putting these ideas into practice. In this chapter, Arthur presents his plan to harness the power of might to use in the service of right. Any reader even vaguely aware of King Arthur mythos will recognize the beginning of his Round Table in this chapter.*

*This chapter is a turning point for Merlyn as well, because Merlyn realizes that his lessons have not been in vain. Arthur's full acceptance of Merlyn's lessons and his attempts to change the state of the world for the better is rapturous for Merlyn, evidenced by the brief song of praise Merlyn sings at the end of the chapter.*

2. How does this chapter develop the theme of might and right?

*Obviously, this chapter serves as Arthur's first pronouncement that he does not intend to rule by the idea that might is right. Up to this point in the novel, the theme of might and right has been explored experientially, as Arthur observes the various practices of the animal kingdom. Additionally, the theme has been explored intellectually between the minds of Merlyn and Arthur. This chapter introduces a new development in the theme: Arthur has now explicitly pitted himself against force and brutality, firmly standing instead behind the idea of justice and morality.*

## Chapter 7

1. Why do the Orkney children wish to capture a unicorn? What does this reveal about their relationship with their mother?

*The Orkney children believe that their mother, Morgause, traveled into the woods with the three visiting knights in an attempt to catch a unicorn. There is a certain amount of confusion among the children over this fact, especially as they are under the impression that Morgause is serving as the virgin necessary to attract a unicorn. They seem vaguely aware that she is not a virgin, and that she is probably doing something else with the knights, other than trying to attract a unicorn, but their thoughts are confused.*

*Nonetheless, they decide that if they can catch a unicorn, their mother will praise and pay attention to them. This serves to reveal the almost desperate longing for attention that the Orkney children have; Morgause has not been an attentive or loving mother, but they nonetheless desire her attention more than anything else. The fact that the Orkney children have such a distant, uncaring mother helps to paint them as misguided and deserving of pity.*

2. What device does the author use to describe the unicorn's initial appearance? Give examples. How does this add to the unicorn's characterization?

*The unicorn is described as almost impossibly beautiful. White uses striking imagery in the paragraphs describing the unicorn, especially in his description of the unicorn's eyes. He writes, "The eyes, circled by this sad and beautiful darkness, were so sorrowful, lonely, gentle and nobly tragic, that they killed all other emotion except love." Later, he calls the unicorn's eyes "melting," and describes them as "brimmed with trustfulness." This breathtaking imagery presents the unicorn as an essentially innocent, deeply beautiful creature.*

3. How does Agravaine's response to the unicorn develop his character? Gareth's? Gawaine's?

*Of the four brothers, Agravaine is the aggressor in this scene. His response to the unicorn—to stab it until it dies—seems almost pathological, given the creature's beauty and harmlessness, and given the boys' plan to bring it home alive. More revealing than this action, however, is his confused thought process following the killing. He insists that he killed the unicorn because it put its head in his mother's lap (although clearly it put its head in Meg's lap, not Morgause's). Agravaine's relationship with his mother is complicated and rather twisted, as he cannot stand the idea of his mother giving attention to a unicorn over him.*

*Gawaine is initially appalled at Agravaine's violence, but quickly recovers and becomes immensely proud of their accomplishment of catching a unicorn. He becomes very excited while envisioning how proud his mother will be when they bring the body back home. His sorrow over the unicorn's death paints him as a more sympathetic character than Agravaine, but his excitement makes it clear he is also focused on pleasing his mother. His bloodlust, as he dances around the unicorn's body, "waving his boar-spear and uttering horrible shrieks," also makes him less sympathetic.*

*Gareth's response paints him as the most sensitive and tenderhearted of the brothers. He strokes the unicorn's head, crying, and he alone has a full sense of the tragedy of its death. He runs away from his brothers, and as he cries, he contemplates falling off of the earth. Of the brothers, he is clearly the most philosophical and the most attuned to tragedy.*

## Chapter 8

1. What important element of King Arthur's reign does this chapter introduce? How does this symbolize his ideals?

*In this chapter, Arthur presents his idea for the Round Table. Arthur decides to make it a round table so that there will be no jealousy among the knights, squabbling about which should deserve to sit at the head of a square table. The design of this table symbolizes his ideals of justice and equality. Arthur recognizes that, even among his knights, the allure of power may corrupt them. His plan for his table comes to symbolize his attempt to establish a new order.*

2. How does Merlyn's anachronistic reference to "an Austrian" illustrate his point? What is the function of this anachronism?

*Merlyn quite obviously is referring to Hitler, in response to Kay's argument about a good reason to start a war (He does not mention Hitler by name, as the name would mean nothing to the characters, living centuries before Hitler's birth). He describes Hitler as someone who "plunged the civilized world into misery and chaos" in order to invalidate Kay's argument and to demonstrate that force, or imposing reformation "by the sword," leads to destruction.*

*This is one of many anachronisms in the text, placed there because of Merlyn's peculiar way of living backward in time. It serves to demonstrate to the reader just how strongly Merlyn feels about Kay's idea—strongly enough to compare Kay's ideas to those of one of the most reviled men who ever lived. Additionally, this comparison to rather contemporary issues serves to imply to the reader that these old ideas that Arthur is trying to solve are by no means extinct. Rather, Arthur's dilemmas and political problems have a certain amount of bearing on society today.*

## **Chapter 9**

1. How does the interaction between Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides produce comic effect in this chapter? What motif does this develop?

*Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides are completely comical figures in this chapter. Their idea to construct a Questing Beast costume in order to cure King Pellinore's depression is so utterly ridiculous that the reader cannot help but laugh. Their long interactions, especially when they are inside the costume, practicing their prances and gallops, are nothing short of slapstick. It is important to remember that these two ridiculous characters are knights.*

*Their behavior reinforces the motif of knighthood that the author developed with King Pellinore in book one. Despite the conventional notion of knights as noble, deadly warriors, the author presents these three as bumbling, comic fools. The tone that the author employs towards these knightly fools continues the satire of knighthood. In addition, this scene produces comic relief, distracting the reader from the unhappiness and confusion of the Orkney children in the castle.*

2. How does this chapter further develop Morgause's relationship with her children?

*After realizing that she will be unable to seduce the visiting knights, Queen Morgause decides to turn her attention to her children. She thinks to herself, "She was the best mother to them in the world!" This statement is laced with dramatic irony. The reader and the author know that this statement is blatantly false; yet it appears that Morgause herself believes it entirely. Even when Morgause forgives Gareth and showers him with kisses, she glances in the mirror, so self-obsessed that her supposed maternal love is not much more than self-love in disguise.*

*In this chapter, the reader sees that Morgause is a source of conflict between her children as well. Gawaine and Agravaine engage in a vicious argument over their mother, although the exact topic of the argument is unclear.*



3. How are Gawaine and Agravaine further characterized in this chapter?

*In this chapter, Gawaine is characterized as prone to violent rages. Indeed, it seems clear that he would have killed Agravaine in his fury had his other two brothers not been there to break up the fight. This childhood brawl is not harmless; in fact, the author foreshadows Gawaine's continuing problems with "black passions," noting that Gawaine will grow up to kill women when he is worked into such a fury.*

*Agravaine, the object of Gawaine's violent wrath, is further characterized as having a very confused relationship with his mother, claiming that he will write to their father to tell him about his mother and the knights. Agravaine is also further developed as a sneering, but ultimately cowardly, character. He willfully provokes Gawaine into a rage, and then pulls his dirk (a short dagger) when Gawaine attacks him.*

## Chapter 10

1. Describe the radical difference in tone between this chapter and the last. What function does this serve in the novel?

*After the overall lighthearted tone of the last chapter (thanks to the antics of Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides), this chapter seems especially weighty and solemn. From the attitudes of King Arthur's men—who expect to be defeated in battle because they are vastly outnumbered—to the discussion of fate and destiny between Merlyn and Arthur, this chapter is vastly different than the last. The tone of this chapter, as well as its placement between two comic chapters, serves to remind the reader of the seriousness of the battle looming for Arthur, and the weighty nature of the decisions he has to make about how to rule.*

2. What is the function of Merlyn's parable in this chapter? What effect does it have on Arthur?

*Merlyn tells the story in order to convince Arthur of the unchangeable nature of the future, regardless of whether one has knowledge of it. This is a rather unexpected parable from Merlyn, who insists upon warning Arthur about certain future events, such as the relationship between Guenever and Lancelot. The parable seems to strike a contemplative, melancholy chord within Arthur. He ponders his legacy, ending the chapter wondering whether his Round Table will be remembered.*



## Chapter 11

1. How does the Questing Beast's behavior in this chapter cast doubt on the convention of questing?

*Like its previous appearance in book one, this chapter demonstrates that the Questing Beast is not nearly as deadly or dangerous as conventional knowledge would have one believe. Indeed, her behavior is once again ironic; rather than attempt to kill or eat any of the knights who venture so close to her, she falls in love with the knights' costume. King Pellinore is able to subdue her and prevent her from chasing Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides simply by holding her tail. Even more unexpectedly, the Queen of Flanders reveals that the Questing Beast has acted as a sort of bloodhound, helping her to track the location of King Pellinore like a loyal dog. With this bit of irony and satire, the author casts doubt on the necessity of knightly quests. It is clear that the Questing Beast does not pose any real danger; yet King Pellinore has devoted years of his life to tracking it in order to kill it. Such a quest is certainly a waste of King Pellinore's time, especially as he refuses to harm the beast on the few occasions he manages to get near it.*

2. What might the camaraderie between the knights and the Gaels at the end of the chapter foreshadow?

*Ever since the arrival of the three knights, the Gaels have viewed them with suspicion. This suspicion is natural enough, since the two cultures are at war, and have been at war intermittently for centuries. At the end of this chapter, however, the Gaels finally accept the three knights warmly. This could foreshadow success for King Arthur in attempting to bring the two cultures together under the Round Table, indicating that there is common ground and room for camaraderie even between these two groups of people.*

## Chapter 12

1. How do Arthur's tactics in the battle seem incompatible with ideas of honor? How do his tactics further his goals of justice and fairness?

*The author describes Arthur's tactics during the battle as atrocities. Arthur breaks several conventions and ideas of chivalry in his decision to not wait until the "fashionable hour," but rather to attack at night when the enemy army is unprepared. Additionally, he violates another rule of chivalry in battle when he instructs his knights to kill the enemy knights, and to ignore the kerns (the common foot soldiers).*

*Although the author describes these tactical decisions as atrocities, he nonetheless also recognizes their innate fairness. White describes the enemy knights as "indignantly surprised by what they considered an unchivalrous personal outrage—outrageous to be attacked with positive manslaughter, as if a baron could be killed like a Saxon kern." Here, the author is gently mocking the unfairness of the class distinctions in battle, when lives are at stake. In effect, King Arthur's decision to ignore notions of chivalry in battle save the lives of many kerns and bring the battle to a swift end when King Lot realizes that his life is in real danger.*

2. This chapter has no long descriptions of bloody, glorious fights, unlike other Arthurian tales. What does this lack of glorification of warfare accomplish?

*This pivotal battle in the beginning of King Arthur's reign is not described in typical warlike detail. There are shockingly few descriptions of individual moments in the battle, and no descriptions of swordplay between knights, as has been customary in the novel so far. (For example, the joust between King Pellinore and Sir Grummore in book one is described in immense detail, describing each blow). The tone in this section lacks glory; in fact, the battle is presented with a sort of detached methodology. This helps to present the battle as tactical, rather than glorious, and demonstrates Arthur's newfound ideals about might and right. He recognizes that warfare is neither fun nor glorious for those kerns who are slaughtered, and the author's tone in describing the battle reflects this change in ideals.*

## Chapter 13

1. How does the author characterize Queen Morgause in this chapter? What effect does this produce?

*Queen Morgause's characterization in this chapter is mysterious and foreboding. Although the reader is unsure what exactly she plans to do with the gruesome Spancel, it is clear that she wishes to use it, running it through her hands in the middle of the night. The characterization emphasizes her magical and ruthless nature. Even more unsettling are the thoughts about King Arthur that linger in her mind while she holds the magical object. This characterization works to foreshadow her intent to do some ill to Arthur, especially given her well-explained hatred toward his father.*

2. How are the Orkney children further characterized in this chapter? What might this foreshadow?

*The Orkney faction are again characterized as oddly obsessed with their mother. They kneel in prayer, preparing for their trip to England, praying that they will be loyal to their mother and hold to the feud against Arthur she has taught them. It is easy for the reader to forget that they are children, frozen in the solemn pose of prayer to be true to their homeland. This certainly foreshadows trouble for England and for King Arthur from this faction, as they explicitly intend to be true to the family feud.*

## **Chapter 14**

1. The author makes a point of mentioning Malory near the beginning of this chapter. What does this reference accomplish? How does it contribute to the tone?

*Part of the distinctive style of The Once and Future King is its reference to other works about King Arthur—most notably, Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur. The novel is a derivative work, drawing from many sources of the mythos of King Arthur’s court. This reference to Malory reminds the reader that White is not the first to tell this story. The self-referential awareness that White demonstrates here grounds the text more firmly as fictional, based on Arthurian mythos and other authors’ versions of the tale. These references, especially the reference in this chapter, often serve to lighten the tone, as White is audacious enough to acknowledge the derivative nature of his work in the work itself.*

2. How does the description of Carlion contribute to the tone of the chapter?

*The imagery that the author uses to describe Carlion is rich and colorful, painting a picture of a medieval court in all its traditional glory. The activity and excitement inside Carlion stands in contrast to the descriptions of the castle in which the Orkney faction grew up; indeed, “the metropolitan glories of Carlion were enough to take their breath away.” This near idyllic description of King Arthur’s Carlion helps establish a joyful, celebratory tone in this chapter. The description of Carlion flows seamlessly into the description of King Pellinore’s wedding and the feast following it, which is an ecstatic occasion. During these descriptions, it seems that all is well in King Arthur’s court.*

3. How (and where) does the author produce a sudden change of tone in this chapter?

*The tone of this chapter changes quite suddenly when the scene shifts to Merlyn in North Humberland. Merlyn jumps out of bed as he remembers what he has forgotten to tell Arthur, something he has been referring to throughout this second book. He remembers the identity of Arthur’s mother. The tone shifts to that of dread as the author laments, “If only he had spun himself to Carlion at once, before it was too late!” It is clear that something of great import is about to happen at Carlion.*

4. How does the pivotal event at the end of the chapter serve to drive the plot forward?

*Although the reader does not yet know the impact that Arthur's son Mordred will have on the plot, it is clear from the tone of the final paragraphs that Arthur's act of sleeping with his sister will cause tragedy to befall him. When outlining Mordred's parentage and Arthur's relation to the Orkney faction, White writes, "This pedigree is a vital part of the tragedy of King Arthur." Although the reader may not know how Mordred will affect Arthur's court, it is explicitly clear that Arthur's action here has condemned his life to end in tragedy.*

5. Why is this second book called *The Queen of Air and Darkness*?

*It is not until the very end of this book that the reader realizes Queen Morgause is the title character. She has been featured in only a few scenes in this entire book; King Arthur, Merlyn, her children, and the knights have all received much more attention in the book than she has. Nonetheless, her status as title character clearly reveals her importance. Once the reader has realized how her seduction of Arthur—and her subsequent pregnancy—is intricately linked to his downfall, the reason the book is named after her becomes clear. She is a looming, extremely important character in this book, as her carefully planned actions and the hatred she plants in her children's minds will spell downfall for Arthur.*