

The Once and Future King

Book One: The Sword in the Stone

Chapter 1

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

Sir Ector and Sir Grummore have a very distinctive way of speaking in this opening chapter. They occasionally seem to have trouble following the thread of the conversation, instead commenting on the port they are drinking or repeating an earlier part of the conversation. In addition, they mispronounce words, such as "eddication," and have a tendency to drop beginning or ending consonants from words, such as "mornin'" and "thinkin'." From this rather light-hearted conversation, the reader can infer that the two men are not terribly well-educated or overly serious or solemn. This conversation serves to establish the two men as good-natured, if slightly comical, characters.

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

This aside is the first of many in The Once and Future King, and is an important element of T.H. White's style throughout the book. This particular aside helps to draw the reader into the story, and makes it apparent that the narrator is attempting to make an ancient story accessible to the modern reader. Technically, mentioning Eton is an anachronism within the story, since Eton does not yet exist, but the narrator uses the anachronism to aid the reader's understanding. This makes it clear that the story is set far in the past—in a time the reader may have difficulty understanding—and simultaneously attempts to make the story universal and relatable.

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

The narrator employs a long, detailed description of the castle in which the characters live, firmly establishing the setting of the novel in medieval times. The imagery describing the thatched houses and the stone bridge of the castle helps to establish setting. Additionally, the list of the weekly program that the characters follow helps to establish setting. Tilting, horsemanship, hawking, fencing, archery, and chivalry are all activities that a reader would expect to find during a medieval setting.

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

Kay is the legitimate son of Sir Ector, and receives better treatment as a result. The Wart, on the other hand, is an orphan, and Kay often teases him about it. Kay has a more forceful personality than the Wart, and he seems more confident and less concerned with arbitrary rules than the Wart is. Although the Wart is a hard worker with talent, he is eager to follow Kay's lead. The narrator calls the Wart a "born follower" and "a hero-worshipper."

Chapter 2

1. What does the Wart's desire to get Cully back reveal about his character?

Although the Wart is dominated by Kay, he is clearly a sensitive and thoughtful boy. When Cully escapes, the Wart recognizes how upset Hob (the falconer) will be over this turn of events. Kay, conversely, is entirely unconcerned with Hob's feelings and calls the hawk rotten and stupid. The Wart is clearly a more thoughtful person than Kay. Additionally, the Wart's decision to stay in the woods reveals the bravery at the core of his character. He may have a lower social status than Kay, but he has a "stout heart" and a strong sense of right and wrong.

2. Discuss the contrast between the Wart's initial impression of King Pellinore and King Pellinore's behavior. What does this contrast accomplish?

Initially, the knight that the Wart sees in the woods is a beautiful, intimidating sight. He stands in a clearing, lit by the moon, an extremely impressive sight for the Wart. Indeed, the knight is described as "still and silent and unearthly." In short, King Pellinore's initial appearance is too beautiful to describe. However, this extraordinary impression changes immediately when the Wart begins to address the knight. As King Pellinore looks around for the source of the Wart's voice, he becomes an extremely comic figure. He nearly falls off his horse, drops his glasses and his lance, and continually has to re-open his visor, as it keeps slamming shut unexpectedly.

3. How is King Pellinore's attitude toward the Questing Beast unexpected?

The King seems to dislike questing after the Beast Glatisant. He describes his hunt for the beast as boring and pointless. Traditional notions of knightly quests indicate that quests are undertaken for glory and honor, or perhaps to rid the world of violent, dangerous beasts. King Pellinore, however, is hunting the Questing Beast simply because it is his duty to do so as a Pellinore. He is resigned to his task of hunting the beast, but he would prefer a comfortable life with a feather bed.

Chapter 3

1. How does the long description of Merlyn's house illuminate his character?

Merlyn is a very whimsical, capricious character, and the fanciful nature of his home reflects this aspect of his personality. His home is filled with unexpected items, including living creatures like field mice, badgers, and an owl. The list of items in Merlyn's house reads like a laundry list of surprising things. It is significant that he owns thousands of books, as he is a learned magician; it is also significant that these books are personified. They are "propped against each other as if they had had too much to drink and did not really trust themselves." This description is significant because even ordinary objects like books take on a certain whimsical quality when Merlyn owns them. Another item of significance in Merlyn's home is a guncase, filled with weapons that have not been invented yet. The presence of anachronistic weapons reveals that Merlyn's powers as a magician and as a time-traveler (of sorts) are genuine.

2. What does Merlyn ask the Wart to do to illustrate his peculiar way of looking at time? How does this illuminate his confusion?

Merlyn asks the Wart to draw the letter W on a piece of paper without looking at the paper, but while looking in a mirror instead. Merlyn uses this to illustrate the way in which he lives his life. He was born backwards in time, meaning he must live his life opposite from the way most people live it. He finds this rather confusing, much like attempting to draw using a mirror.

Chapter 4

1. How does sir Ector respond to Merlyn's testimonials and demonstrations of his magic, and what does this reveal about his character?

Sir Ector is a comical character again in this chapter. Although Merlyn's demonstrations of his magical ability are nothing short of amazing, Sir Ector insists that it is merely trickery, not real magic. The idea that a full grown tree suddenly appearing in the courtyard could be caused by mirrors is ridiculous, but Sir Ector says it nonetheless. Sir Ector is trying to be skeptical, but only accomplishes appearing absurd. He also contradicts himself; although he expresses skepticism about Merlyn's abilities, he does not hesitate to hire Merlyn to tutor the boys.

2. How does Merlyn treat Kay differently than he treats the Wart, and what might this foreshadow?

Merlyn is quick to chastise Kay, and he uses very formal language as he does so. This differs significantly from his interaction with the Wart, which has been largely friendly and informal thus far. This stands in contrast to how the other characters treat Kay and the Wart; Kay is usually favored over the Wart, but Merlyn turns this on its head. This might foreshadow Merlyn's careful tutelage of the Wart and an important destiny for the Wart.

Chapter 5

1. Near the beginning of the chapter, the writer describes the Castle of the Forest Sauvage as it stands currently, rather than during the setting of the novel. What function does this aside serve?

Much like the aside in chapter one, this aside serves to reinforce the idea that the story is set in an ancient past. Indeed, the time of the story is so long past that Sir Ector's castle is now populated by only lizards and sparrows, and "the Society for the Preservation of This and That" now oversee the maintenance of the ruined castle. Additionally, this aside continues to develop the light-hearted tone of this book; the narrator can step back from the events of the narrative to address the reader directly because no tragic or somber elements have yet occurred in the narrative.

2. How is the Wart's lesson unexpected?

The Wart expects his lessons to be traditional, taking place in a stuffy classroom. He is not at all excited about beginning his learning with Merlyn. However, his lesson turns out to be an experiential one; Merlyn turns him into a fish.

3. Merlyn claims that the roach is "neurotic," but helps her anyway. What does this reveal about his character?

Merlyn does not apparently believe that the roach is truly sick; he says that her case is for a psychologist, not for a physician. Nonetheless, he performs his swimming dance and heals her, "perhaps by way of touch or massage or hypnotism." This reveals the kindness inherent in Merlyn's character for all creatures, even neurotic fish. Importantly, it also demonstrates to the Wart the importance of treating creatures with respect.

4. How is Mr. P., the pike in the moat, characterized? Given this description, what is the narrator's attitude toward the idea that "Might is Right?"

Merlyn refers to Mr. P. as an emperor. He takes the Wart to see the pike so that the Wart can see "what it is to be a king." The pike is described with critical adjectives; his face is lined with "cruelty, sorrow, age, pride, selfishness, loneliness and thoughts too strong for individual brains." Importantly, the narrator describes his expression as like that of Uncle Sam. The pike is obsessed with power, and he professes, "Power of the body decides everything in the end, and only Might is Right." The pike is characterized harshly, and he reacts to the Wart's presence with extreme violence, attempting to eat him. It is clear that the narrator considers the idea that Might is Right to be cruel and violent. The pike's physical power makes him little more than a bully, and his obsession with power has corrupted him, making him a menacing ruler.

Chapter 6

1. How does this short chapter further develop Merlyn's character? Kay's?

Merlyn is uninterested in sports like archery, which are not of the mind. He falls asleep while Kay and the Wart practice their archery, indicating his complete lack of interest in pursuits like these.

Kay is further characterized as short-tempered and impatient in this chapter. In addition, his reaction to the gore-crow indicates a level of superstition in his character that is not present in the Wart.

2. What might the gore-crow's action foreshadow?

The narrator describes the gore-crow as a portent, or an omen. This section is ambiguous, so a number of answers are acceptable. Students should recognize that the gore-crow's action of stealing the arrow is a foreboding omen. Students should recognize that it is foreboding because the arrow is described as beautiful, "steady, golden and superb," and the gore-crow stops the progress of this perfect arrow. Additionally, students might point out that a crow is a bird traditionally associated with death, and thus students might predict the death of a character.

Chapter 7

1. What is Merlyn's tone toward athleticism and knighthood? Why?

Merlyn has little interest or patience for athletic pursuits. In fact, he is openly contemptuous of such pursuits when he talks to the Wart, calling knights "[a] lot of brainless unicorns swaggering about and calling themselves educated." His overall tone is that of contempt; he sees the intellect as much more important than physical prowess.

2. What tone does the narrator use in depicting King Pellinore and Sir Grummore's joust? What does this tone accomplish?

The joust, as the narrator describes it, is an utterly ridiculous thing. The narrator describes the two knights as "patiently blundering together," and this word choice demonstrates that there is nothing impressive about this battle. In fact, even after the two knights have lost their tempers and battle in earnest, the narrator describes them as "like two billy-goats." There is no nobility in this simile; the two knights are compared to harmless animals. In the midst of the battle, the two knights argue like children. The narrator makes a point to construct the battle with a tone of mockery and ridicule. Using this tone, the narrator pokes fun at the notions of jousting, chivalry, and knighthood itself, proving Merlyn's point about athleticism.

Chapter 8

1. What does Merlyn claim is “the way to learn?” Does this statement give significance to the Wart’s unusual lessons so far?

Merlyn explains to the Wart that he will turn him into a hawk for the night, so that he can spend the night in the mews with the other hawks and listen to them. “That is the way to learn, by listening to the experts,” he says. This statement outlines the reasoning behind Merlyn’s method of teaching: he turns the Wart into animals so that the Wart can learn from the animals themselves.

2. How are the hawks in this chapter likened to the military?

Merlyn likens the hawks to cavalry officers and says that they are dedicated to their profession, like an order of knighthood. He also calls them a “Spartan military mess.” The hawks themselves refer to each other as officers—colonels and captains—and follow very strict rules of behavior. There is a definite hierarchy among the birds, with the peregrine at the head. In addition, the hawks have a sense of duty related to their position in the mews; when the spar-hawk realizes that he has forgotten to keep his tarrings, the hawks all share a sense of shame at his dereliction of duty.

3. What does Colonel Cully’s insanity imply about military society or culture?

Colonel Cully is prone to muttering to himself and seems unable to control his violent tendencies. It is Cully’s nearly uncontrollable tendency to violence that makes the Wart’s ordeal in the mews dangerous. Cully tries to warn the Wart of these tendencies, saying, “I feel eternal longings in me.” Cully’s insanity is significant because it implies that the rules of a military society cannot control violence. Indeed, it appears that the strict hierarchy of the society is what caused Cully to lose his wits in the first place. The Wart’s ordeal among the hawks and the murderous Cully proves to be another lesson in the problematic nature of “Might makes Right.”

4. Cully makes copious allusions to Shakespeare, specifically Macbeth. What function do these allusions serve in characterizing Cully? In foreshadowing the Wart's future?

Students with a knowledge of Macbeth will recognize Cully's allusions, especially his muttering, "Is this a damned dagger I see before me, the handle toward my hand?" Additionally, near the end of the chapter, Cully mutters, "The bell invites me. Hear it not, Merlin, for it is a knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell." Shortly before, he makes a reference to Hamlet, proclaiming, "Ah, for quietus, with a bare bodkin!"

These allusions function in characterizing Cully as deeply conflicted, quite close to the edge of madness. The quote he chooses from Hamlet comes from a soliloquy in which Hamlet is contemplating suicide. The quotes he chooses from Macbeth come from a soliloquy in which Macbeth is considering murdering the king, questioning his own sanity as he ponders.

Additionally, as it is the Wart he speaks to when he refers to the bell, Cully is characterizing the Wart as King Duncan (from Macbeth). Not only does this foreshadow the Wart's eventual role as a king, it works equally well to foreshadow his kingdom's downfall because of treachery within it.

5. What does the title that the hawks give to the Wart foreshadow?

After his ordeal, the hawks bestow upon the Wart the title "Wart the King of Merlins." In fact, Balan proclaims, "We shall have a regular king in that young candidate!" This foreshadows the Wart's eventual role as the king of England.

Chapter 9

1. What does the aftermath of the fight between the Wart and Kay reveal about the Wart's character?

Despite the fact that Kay has given the Wart a black eye, the Wart still seeks fairness for Kay. He approaches Merlyn to ask why Kay has not been turned into an animal for his lessons, and argues with Merlyn until Merlyn agrees to give Kay his own adventure. This reveals that the Wart is kind-hearted and inclined towards fairness and justice, despite any personal resentment he may carry.

2. Merlyn claims that he lacks the power to change Kay into other creatures. What might this foreshadow about the Wart?

It may seem surprising to the student that Merlyn lacks the ability to do the same magic on Kay that he uses for the Wart. This is significant because it indicates that the Wart is destined to become more important than Kay. The Wart has his own special brand of lessons because Merlyn possesses knowledge about his future. "I have tried to hint at some of the reasons for the fact," Merlyn says, indicating that he knows a great deal about why the Wart must receive special lessons.

Chapter 10

1. How is the aftermath of Kay and the Wart's fight similar to the aftermath of King Pellinore's joust with Sir Grummore? What does this indicate about the chivalric code?

Just like the two knights in chapter seven, Kay and the Wart are friends again after their fight. After King Pellinore and Sir Grummore fell unconscious onto the ground, Merlyn predicted: "They will be the best of friends when they come to. They always are." Kay and the Wart respond the same way as the two knights, eyeing each other "with a kind of confused affection." This similarity is significant because it demonstrates the chivalric code of the time; even after a fight, people of similar social standing have no need to quarrel.

2. Describe Little John's dialect. What does the narrator's use of this dialect reveal about Little John's character?

Little John is clearly uneducated, and has a certain amount of disdain for "them book-learning chaps." Little John has a tendency to shorten words, conjugate verbs improperly, and mispronounce things. "However" becomes "how'm ever;" he says "knowed" instead of "knew;" and he pronounced wood as 'ood. Besides his dialect indicating that he is uneducated, it also lends his interaction with the boys a humorous tone.

3. How does the inclusion of the well-known character Robin Hood, (called Robin Wood here), affect the tone of this chapter?

This chapter (and several others that follow) have an even more whimsical, fantastical tone than the previous parts of the book. The inclusion of Robin Hood gives this chapter an almost mythological tone, mixing even more fantasy with the story. Robin Hood is known for robbing the rich to feed the poor, so his inclusion also brings to mind the struggle for social equality during Arthur's time. Lastly, the inclusion of Robin Hood further helps to establish the medieval setting of the novel, indicating that the events of the novel occur in a past so distant, they exist in legend.

Chapter 11

1. How do the fantastic elements in this chapter affect the tone of the novel?

This chapter includes fairies, a griffin, a castle made out of entirely edible materials, and magic. These fantastical elements serve to make the tone of this chapter playful and light. Although Kay and the Wart do experience real danger as they attempt to rescue their friends, the presence of magical elements downplays the danger they face.

2. How are the foods the Oldest Ones choose to construct the castle ironic? How does this irony affect the plot?

The Oldest Ones hope to tempt the boys to eat the castle. However, they unwittingly choose foods that are quite disgusting to Kay and the Wart rather than appetizing ones. The drawbridge is made of butter (with cow hairs still in it), and the soldiers are made of cheese. This is ironic because the Oldest Ones clearly misunderstand human food preferences, producing a comic effect. Ultimately, the trial is much simpler for the boys because of this misunderstanding. The boys feel nausea rather than hunger, ensuring absolutely that they will not eat anything.

Chapter 12

1. How is Kay's character further developed in this chapter?

Although he is arrogant and prone to exaggeration, Kay becomes a more sympathetic character during his adventure. He demonstrates courage and tremendous skill during the battle with the griffin, shooting it directly in the eye and likely saving the Wart's life. Kay is gracious towards Robin Wood, saying that his adventure has been lovely.

2. How is the Wart's character further developed in this chapter? What does his choice of old Wat as his gift reveal about his character?

Although the Wart is injured during the battle with the griffin, he nonetheless demonstrates courage during the battle and in dealing with his injury. More important, however, is his choice of gift from Robin Wood. While Kay chooses to keep the head of the griffin, the Wart asks for Wat. He wishes to bring the insane Wat home in order to see if Merlyn can cure him. This demonstrates that he cares little for glory, preferring to practice kindness and compassion, even towards those with a lower social status than himself.

Chapter 13

1. What tone does the narrator employ to describe life in the ant colony? Support your answer.

The tone of this chapter is a jarring departure from the tone of the previous chapters. Once the Wart enters the ant colony, he becomes little more than a slave. The signs above each tunnel—EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY—set the tone for life inside the colony. The Wart comes across a pair of ant corpses, and he observes that ants have no ability to think and very limited language and a seemingly unlimited capacity for warfare. These elements combine to create a foreboding tone for life inside the ant colony.

2. What function does the description of the ant language, particularly the emphasis on the use of “Done” and “Not-Done,” serve?

The description of the ant language serves to illustrate how obsessed the ants in the colony are with efficiency and duty. The ants are virtually automatons, so consumed with their repetitive tasks that they can think of nothing else. Nothing is of importance to the ants besides completing their tasks; thus the words “Done” and “Not Done” communicate everything that needs to be said. The ants are a perfect army, allowing no room for independent thought. In fact, any questions are “a sign of insanity.” “Their life was not questionable: it was dictated.”

3. What theme do the ants’ constant broadcasts develop?

The broadcasts are remarkably circular. They serve as a form of propaganda for the ants, convincing them of the necessity for war. What is especially remarkable about the broadcasts is that they allow no room for dissent. They are logically constructed so as to make warfare seem necessary and unavoidable. This further develops the theme of might and right. The ant colony clearly believes that Might is Right, preaching: “We are a mighty race and have a natural right to subjugate their puny one.” The terrible, inhuman, slave-like aspect of life in the ant colony, coupled with their affinity for warfare, cast doubt on the idea that Might is Right.

4. How does the Wart respond to his life among the ants, and what does this reveal about his character?

After an indefinite amount of time in the colony, the Wart begins to lose his joy for life. It is the total monotony of the ant colony, even more so than their warlike nature, that dehumanizes him the most. The Wart is relieved when Merlyn finally transforms him back into a human. His time among the ants teaches him about the destructive and terrible nature of war and warlike regimes, and his extreme dislike indicates that he has learned this lesson well. The Wart despises the dehumanizing effect of living in such a society, and may be beginning to grasp the problems associated with the idea that Might is Right.

Chapter 14

1. How does the narrator portray the feudal system?

Perhaps surprisingly, the feudal system is not painted in a negative light. As the narrator portrays it, the feudal system can be close to ideal, if the man in power is just and good, like Sir Ector. The narrator does admit that the feudal system can be terrible, but only if those in power are evil and abuse it. Under Sir Ector, life seems close to ideal for the laborers. “They were healthy,” the narrator asserts, “free of an air with no factory smoke in it, and, which was most of all to them, their heart’s interest was bound up with their skill in labor.”

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

Up to this point, the reader has seen Sir Ector as a mildly pompous and entertaining character. This chapter, however, paints him in a more detailed fashion. Sir Ector is a good and kindly lord to his feudal serfs, and he values his subjects a great deal. Further in the chapter, Sir Ector is portrayed as a bit more clever than he has been previously. He dislikes the presumption of the king, who decides to send a hunter to his castle every year. In an effort to think of a way to discredit the king’s huntsman, Sir Ector decides to send for Robin Wood to join in the hunt. This forethought and mild rebellious nature indicates that Sir Ector is perhaps more clever than he has seemed.

Chapter 15

1. What techniques does the narrator use to establish an idyllic setting in this chapter? Give examples.

This chapter has many examples of imagery that the narrator uses to establish an idyllic setting. In describing the snow, the narrator says, “The snow lay as it ought to lie. It hung heavily on the battlements, like thick icing on a very good cake.” Figurative devices, like the preceding simile, are also numerous in this chapter. Students should also mention the inclusion of songs in this chapter. The songs—playful and lively—also help to describe the Christmas gathering as serene and joyful.

Chapter 16

1. Compare and contrast the adventure of the boar hunt with the Wart's earlier adventure at the Castle of the Old Ones. What effect does the author create by juxtaposing realistic chapters against fantastic, magical chapters?

The boar hunt in this chapter is very realistic, especially compared to the adventure at the Castle of the Old Ones. This hunt contains no fantastic elements at all; instead, it is grim and graphic. During the hunt, a valued dog named Beaumont has his back broken, and genuine grief surrounds the dog's death. The realistic nature of this hunt, especially as compared to the griffin hunt, serves to ground the story in its historical context. Despite the fact that this is undoubtedly a story containing myths and fantastic legends, not every element is magical.

The description of the boar hunt lends the story realism. The juxtaposition of this realistic chapter against a magical chapter creates the effect of crafting a completely different world, one in which both magic griffins and bloody boar hunts are equally accepted. The juxtaposition blurs the line between reality and fantasy in King Arthur's world, serving to create an intriguing medieval world that is equal parts fantastic and dangerous.

2. Discuss the irony behind King Pellinore's meeting with the Questing Beast. How does this section develop the narrator's tone towards knighthood and questing?

In this chapter, the reader meets the Questing Beast for the first time. Quite surprisingly, the beast is not at all ferocious. Instead, it is docile and depressed. It is comic in its depression, as it rests its head in King Pellinore's lap, and he urges it not to die. Irony is developed here, because the reader discovers that the Questing Beast is not the terrible, savage creature of traditional knightly tales. Instead it is sympathetic, slightly ridiculous, and sad.

This passage rings with irony and satire. The Questing Beast is a deeply ironic symbol, demonstrating the futility of knightly quests. If it is so docile that it poses no threat whatever, why has King Pellinore quested after it for so many years? The docility of the Questing Beast makes knighthood and especially knightly quests seem utterly pointless. The description of the beast's true nature marks another example of the narrator satirizing knighthood.

3. How does this chapter further develop King Pellinore's character?

King Pellinore becomes simultaneously more ridiculous and more sympathetic in this chapter. He is honestly very concerned about the Questing Beast, which he has spent his entire adulthood chasing and trying to kill. Instead of killing the beast when he finally finds it, he demands that it be taken back to the castle and nursed back to health, all so that it may later be set free so that he can hunt it again. He begs the beast, "Oh, please don't die, Beast, and leave me without any fewmets!" Although he is utterly ridiculous, the reader cannot help but feel a sense of compassion for him, given his obviously genuine grief.

Chapter 17

1. What does Archimedes' personification of pigeons as Quakers accomplish?

Archimedes draws parallels between human characteristics and bird characteristics with his personification as pigeons as Quakers. This parallel helps the reader to see the ultimate goal of the Wart's unusual education. The Wart is learning about human societies and human characteristics each time he experiences life as another species. In pointing out the similarities between the two species, Archimedes aids the Wart (and the reader) in understanding the parallel lessons they teach.

2. How does this chapter further develop the Wart's character?

From his responses to Merlyn's questions, it is clear that the Wart has spent a good deal of time observing nature in general, and different species of birds in particular. These qualities help to establish him as a thoughtful character. Additionally, his answers to their questions indicate that he has learned to see parallels between human behavior and animal behavior. He personifies rooks, calling them "thieves and practical jokers," and claims that they possess courage. He is clearly reaping rewards from his lessons with Merlyn.

3. What is the effect of the juxtaposition between Kay and the Wart at the end of the chapter? What does this suggest about Kay's character?

While Merlyn, Archimedes, and the Wart have been discussing and dissecting the civilization and language of birds, Kay has killed one instead. The juxtaposition between Kay and the rest of the characters creates humor and reinforces the idea that Kay is quite different from the Wart.

The Wart is intellectual, while Kay is simpler. Importantly, this juxtaposition does not indicate that Kay is evil or a murderer; rather, he is merely doing what is expected of him. The contrast between the Wart's actions and Kay's foreshadow that the Wart is meant for greater, more complex things, while Kay is destined for simpler pleasures.

Chapter 18

1. What tone does the narrator employ in describing the geese and their society? Support your answer.

The narrator's tone is joyful, almost full of worship, in describing the society and flight of the geese. The song they sing during the flight is almost religious in nature, fully of ecstasy and freedom. Wart himself feels that he wants to "sing a chorus to life" itself during his flight with the geese. As the geese fly, the narrator also employs a great deal of picturesque imagery relating to the natural world. This natural beauty, together with the freedom and unrestrained happiness of the flight, makes for a joyful tone.

2. How does goose society differ from ant society? How is this significant?

Goose society is not warlike. In fact, Lyo-lyok, the goose speaking to the Wart, is genuinely offended and disgusted by the idea of war as the Wart describes it. Lyo-lyok implies that there is no war among the geese because there are no boundaries among them. This contrast between the two societies that Wart has experienced indicates that he has lessons to learn about the nature of war and the necessity of it. Perhaps the Wart already has some grasp of this lesson; he fully enjoys his time as a goose, while he despised his time spent as an ant.

3. What theme is reinforced by the last line of Chapter 18?

In calling the Wart a baby, Lyo-lyok implies that his ideas about fighting being knightly are immature and uninformed. This expands upon the theme of might and right, continuing to nudge the Wart towards an understanding that might should not make right.

Chapter 19

1. Contrast the songs the geese sing with the songs the ants sang. What does this difference reveal?

The songs of the ants are not exciting or joyful. Rather, the ants were not even interested in the songs; they "accepted them as matters of course," as rituals rather than spontaneous. The content of the ants' songs is violent and warlike. The ant chorus sings, "When Other blood spurts from the knife, Then everything is fine."

Conversely, the geese sing spontaneously as they fly, and their songs are often light-hearted or sentimental. None of their songs are savage or warlike, nor do they glorify violence in any way. This difference in song lyrics indicates the vastly divergent differences between the two cultures, and it is no accident that the Wart much prefers spending time with the geese.

Chapter 20

1. Why do Kay and the Wart drift apart in this chapter? What does this indicate about medieval society?

The boys have aged a great deal in this chapter. Kay is nearing the age of knighthood, and the Wart is nearing the age of becoming Kay's squire. Kay and the Wart do not have a falling out; rather, Kay realizes that he should not be close with his squire, for the sake of societal expectations. Kay knows that he "would need to be more dignified as a knight, and could not afford to have his squire on intimate terms with him." This indicates that medieval society is extremely concerned with hierarchy and social status, so much that even two boys who were close friends as youngsters cannot remain so in their adulthood.

2. How does the Wart's conversation with Merlyn about ridding the world of evil further develop the Wart's character?

The Wart has a different idea of knighthood than Kay does. While Kay seems to be looking forward to becoming a knight because it will fulfill his expectations, the Wart believes that becoming a knight should come with noble duties. The Wart imagines that, as a knight, he would take it upon himself to rid the world of evil, indicating his nobility and sense of duty. Additionally, such an idea also indicates his naïveté and his innocence, if he truly believes that one man can expunge evil from the world.

3. Analyze Merlyn's response to the Wart's desire to rid the world of evil. What might it foreshadow?

Merlyn is mildly upset by the Wart's bold statement, wringing his hands and chewing on his beard. He seems on the verge of warning the Wart against something, saying, "Wait till it happens and see," but he does not reveal any further information. Merlyn's concern may foreshadow suffering for the Wart. After all, Merlyn does have knowledge of the future. His tragic stare into the fire at the end of the chapter might foreshadow a knowledge that the Wart will attempt to defeat all the evil of the world.

Chapter 21

1. How does the Wart's decision to spare the hedgehog relate to the theme of might and right? What does it reveal about the Wart?

As a badger, the Wart has every ability to “munch up hedgehogs unconcernedly,” yet he chooses not to when the hedgehog pleads for his life. The Wart acts unexpectedly cruel towards the hedgehog at first, simply because the Wart is a much stronger creature and thus he can do whatever he likes to the hedgehog. However, the Wart's better nature ultimately triumphs, and he spares the hedgehog. This indicates the Wart's growing belief that might is not always right, and that power should not necessarily be used to harm others when it can be avoided.

2. What is the function of the badger's parable?

The parable serves as an origin story for all creatures, explaining how different animals came to develop their defining characteristics. It also explains how man came to be the ruler over all the other creatures of the world. The most important point of the parable, however, is the badger's idea that man has become a tyrant rather than a ruler. This is another idea that relates to the theme of might and right; thus, the badger's parable serves to further illuminate this theme.

3. What does the Wart's continued glorification of warfare reveal about his character?

Despite the many lessons that the Wart has learned, he still demonstrates an obsession with warfare in this chapter, pointing out that warfare breeds courage, loyalty and love. This statement is at odds with some of his previous actions, such as sparing the hedgehog and his time among the geese. It reveals that the Wart is still young and has much to learn and that he is still influenced by the medieval society in which he lives, despite Merlyn's teachings and the lessons he has learned from the animals.

Chapter 22

1. What does King Pellinore's proclamation about the sword in the stone foreshadow?

King Pellinore informs Sir Ector, Kay, and the others that there is a sword lodged inside an anvil and a stone outside of a church in London. Whoever can remove the sword from the stone is the next rightful king of England. As “The Sword in the Stone” is the title of Book One, it clearly will have significance for the characters, most notably the protagonist, Wart.

It is worth noting that the Wart is not present when King Pellinore informs the court about the sword, so he is unaware of its significance. Nonetheless, as the Wart is the protagonist of this book, and Merlyn himself has hinted that the Wart has great things in store for him, King Pellinore's proclamation serves to foreshadow that the Wart will be the one to remove the sword.

Chapter 23

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

The use of the phrase “or whenever it was” indicates that the saga of The Once and Future King is as much fictional as it is historical. Up to this point in the novel, the story has included fantastical elements along with realistic, historically-based elements, constructing a world that blurs the line between magic and reality. The use of this phrase further emphasizes this blurred line, indicating that it is not important exactly when these events took place; rather, it is the meaning of the events that is important.

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

Kay’s character undergoes a transformation in this chapter. At first, he insults the Wart by offering him money if he fetches his sword quickly. This further establishes Kay as a person very concerned with societal status; he behaves this way towards his squire because it is how he is expected to behave. When the Wart returns with the sword from the stone, Kay claims responsibility for pulling it out. However, Kay tells his father the truth once they return to the churchyard. Despite Kay’s arrogance, concern with social hierarchy, and desire for glory, he is ultimately a sincere, respectable character.

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

The Wart is able to pull the sword from the stone only when he has recognized and internalized the lessons he has learned from each animal. It is not the Wart’s strength that removes the sword, nor is it merely the fact that his father was King Uther. Rather, it is his communion with the animals, whom the narrator describes as “the lovers and helpers of the Wart,” and the lessons he has learned from each of them.

Chapter 24

1. How does the narrator's inclusion of the list of gifts sent to the Wart help to conclude Book One?

The long list of gifts that the Wart receives serves to conclude Book One well by reminding the reader of the influential characters in the Wart's life thus far. The list also includes some comic relief, as this light-hearted book ends, and a much more somber book begins.

2. What tone does the narrator employ in this chapter? What does this tone foreshadow about King Arthur's rule?

The narrator employs a hopeful tone in this, the final chapter in Book One. The Wart enjoys the gifts he has received, and especially enjoys the reappearance of his beloved tutor. Merlyn's speech darkens the mood of the chapter, but only slightly, as he speaks of sorrows for Arthur in the future, but also of joys. The book ends on an almost triumphant note, as Merlyn addresses the Wart as "King Arthur" and promises to stay with him for a long time. This hopeful tone foreshadows positive change in Arthur's kingdom, and a chance for success as a ruler. The triumphant tone is marred only slightly by Merlyn's ambiguous speech.