

Study Questions for The Once and Future King

Part I: The Sword in the Stone

Chapter One

1. What two types of education does Sir Ector insist upon for Kay and the Wart?
2. Discuss the relationship between Kay and the Wart.
3. What aspects of medieval life are presented in this chapter?

Chapter Two

4. What elements of fantasy, superstition, and/or the supernatural are introduced in this chapter?

Chapter Three

5. Discuss the Wart's meeting with Merlyn, his reaction to what he sees, and the result of the encounter.

Chapter Four

6. How is Kay described?

Chapter Five

7. While he is a perch, what does the Wart learn from Mr. P about power?

Chapter Six

8. Discuss the differences in Kay's and the Wart's reactions to the gore-crow's action.

Chapter Seven

9. How does the joust between King Pellinore and Sir Grummore illustrate Merlyn's contention that tilting and horsemanship are not important aspects of a gentleman's education?
10. After the Wart has successfully completed his ordeal, what significant prediction does Balan make?

Chapter Nine

11. What causes Kay's jealousy of the Wart? What explanation does Merlyn give the Wart about his situation?

Chapter Ten

12. What has Morgan le Fay done that Robin Wood needs Kay and the Wart's help to remedy?

Chapter Eleven

13. Why does Robin need the boys' help?
14. What sits on the highest tower of Morgan le Fay's Castle Chariot?

Chapter Twelve

15. What does each of the boys ask for at the end of the adventure with Robin Wood? What do their choices indicate about their characters?

Chapter Thirteen

16. What frustrates the Wart about the language of the ants?
17. What event causes the ants to begin to prepare for battle?

Chapter Fourteen

18. Show how the feudal system is defended through the portrayal of Sir Ector, the master of a manor.
19. What point does Sir Ector's reaction to the letter from Uther Pendragon make about the hierarchy of feudalism?

Chapter Fifteen

20. What function does this chapter serve? What is the tone?

Chapter Sixteen

21. After the successful boar hunt, what discovery causes King Pellinore to be greatly distressed?

Chapter Seventeen

22. What is ironic about Kay's announcement that he was late for his geography lesson because he had been hunting and had killed a thrush?

Chapter Eighteen

23. What question does the Wart ask Lyo-Lyok that causes her to turn her back on him in disgust? What is she so startled?

24. What observation does Loy-Lyok make about fighting ants and humans? What can be inferred from her observation?

Chapter Nineteen

25. Summarize what Lyo-Lyok teaches the Wart about the White-fronts.

Chapter Twenty

26. As the years pass and the boys come closer to manhood, what change occurs in the relationship between Kay and the Wart? Why?

27. What prayer does the Wart say he would make if he were to be made a knight? Why?

Chapter Twenty-One

28. What advice does Merlyn give the Wart about being sad? Why?

29. What two things does the badger tell the Wart that he could teach him, and why are they important lessons?

30. Why does the badger tell the Wart that the parable he related was a trifle optimistic?

31. How does the badger make his point that warfare is not something to be glorified?

Chapter Twenty-Two

32. What immediate problem does King Uther Pendragon's death cause?

33. Why is a tournament proclaimed for New Year's Day?

Chapter Twenty-Three

34. What has the Wart's experiences with the animals he met enabled him to do?

35. How does the Wart react when Sir Ector and Kay kneel before him, acknowledging him as the new King of England?

Chapter Twenty-Four

36. What change occurs in England after Arthur becomes King?

Part II: The Queen of Air and Darkness

Chapter One

1. Describe the weather-cock atop the round tower of Morgause and Lot's castle.

2. Relate the incidents which led to King Uther's marriage to Igraine of Cornwall.

3. What is the relationship between Queen Morgause and her sons?

Chapter Two

4. What is the motto of chivalry according to Merlyn? Why is this the motto?

5. What is to happen to Merlyn that will prevent him from giving Arthur advice?

6. Who is Arthur compared to at the end of the chapter? Why?

Chapter Three

7. Why does Merlyn say that the revolt planned by the Gaelic Confederation is against Man's destiny?

8. What two feuds in particular cause the war according to Merlyn?

Chapter Four

9. What is Merlyn's belief about war? How does he think wrongs should be redressed?
10. What warning does Merlyn give Arthur about his reign? Why?

Chapter Five

11. What suspicious do the Gaels have about King Pellinore and Sir Palomides?

Chapter Six

12. What does Arthur finally deduce is Merlyn's reason for helping him win the two battles against the Gaels?
13. What does Arthur propose to do if he wins the next battle?
14. Has Merlyn lived in vain? Explain.

Chapter Seven

15. Why do Morgause's sons plan a unicorn hunt? What is the result of their scheme?

Chapter Eight

16. How does Arthur intend to prevent jealousy among the knights of his new chivalric order?
17. Which two reformers does Merlyn analyze? What was the difference in the reformers' approaches?
18. What significant remark does Kay make about Arthur's present war?

Chapter Nine

19. What purpose does the account of Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides' masquerade as the Questing Beast serve?

Chapter Ten

20. Why does Merlyn relate to Arthur the parable of the man who fled to Aleppo?
21. Explain the significance of the inscription that Merlyn says will be on Arthur's tombstone. What is Arthur's reaction?

Chapter Twelve

22. Why is the battle of Bedegraine a war within a war?
23. What two atrocities does King Arthur commit that enable him to win the battle of Bedegraine, even though he is outnumbered three to one?

Chapter Thirteen

24. Why does Morgause plan to go to Arthur's court?
25. What direction does the arrow of the carrion crow weather vane atop Morgause's castle point?

Chapter Fourteen

26. Who excels at the games provided for the youngsters at the wedding celebration?
27. What important fact does Merlyn forget to tell Arthur? Why is Merlyn unable to give the information to Arthur when he finally remembers?
28. How does the tragedy of King Arthur resemble classical Greek tragedy?

Part III: The Ill-Made Knight

Chapter One

1. How does Lancelot account for the fact that he has an ugly face? What name would he use when he became a knight?

Chapter Two

2. Why does Lancelot devote three years of his life to rigid discipline and training?

Chapter Three

3. What news prompts Lancelot to decide he should go to England at once?

Chapter Four

4. What is wrong with the Orkney Faction, according to Arthur? How does Pellinore incense them?
5. Explain how the sport of falconry mirrors the feudal hierarchical structure.
6. What does Lancelot finally realize about Guenever, whom he heartily had disliked? Why?

Chapter Five

7. What does Arthur decide to do when he sees that Lancelot and Guenever are falling in love?
8. Why is the Roman war the logical consequence of the battle of Bedegraine? What was the outcome of the Roman war?
9. What has Arthur decided about Lancelot by the time they return to England?

Chapter Six

10. Why does Lancelot ask Arthur to let him go on a quest, even though they have just returned from the Roman wars?

Chapter Seven

11. Why does Lancelot continue to pursue quests?

Chapter Eight

12. At the end of Lancelot's first year of question, what error in judgement does he make?

Chapter Nine

13. Even though the marriage of Arthur and Guenever was "made," why is it successful? What one element is missing for Guenever, however?
14. Why is Arthur distressed about the progress of the Round Table?

Chapter Ten

15. How does Lancelot feel about Arthur, about Guenever, and about himself? Why does he have these feelings about himself?

Chapter Eleven

16. Why does Lancelot value his chastity so highly? What does he believe his virtue enables him to do?

Chapter Twelve

17. How does Lancelot react when he realizes that Elaine has tricked him into her bed? Why does he react in this way?
18. What will Elaine name Lancelot's child? Why? What is Lancelot's reaction?

Chapter Thirteen

19. What is the seventh sense? What happens when this sense is acquired?
20. When Lancelot returns to Camelot, how does he see himself? What action does he take as the result of his new self-image?

Chapter Fourteen

21. During their year of joy, what secret childhood dreams does Lancelot reveal to Guenever?
22. Who has to be good at things, according to Lancelot? Why?

Chapter Fifteen

23. Even though Guenever and Lancelot reconcile after she finds out about Lancelot's son Galahad, what happens to their love? Explain.

Chapter Sixteen

24. How does Arthur react to Lancelot and Guenever's affair? Why does he react in this way?
25. What one effort does Arthur make to confront the problem of Lancelot and Guenever's affair? What is the result of his effort?

Chapter Seventeen

26. What ultimatum does Guenever give Lancelot about Elaine? How does she intend to see whether Lancelot complies?

Chapter Eighteen

27. Although Elaine admits that she tricked Lancelot a second time, what does Guenever tell Lancelot? How does he react?

Chapter Nineteen

28. In the two years since Elaine returned home from Camelot, what has she been doing?

Chapter Twenty

29. What does King Pellens plan to do with the Wild Man who appears at his castle?

Chapter Twenty-One

30. Why does Elaine decide to become a nun? Was she desperate? Explain.

Chapter Twenty-Two

31. What conditions does Lancelot set before he agrees to stay with Elaine?
32. What is the meaning of Chevalier Mal Fet?

Chapter Twenty-Three

33. What news do Ector and Degalis bring to Lancelot?

Chapter Twenty-Four

34. Why does Lancelot say he cannot leave Elaine? What happens to change Lancelot's mind?

Chapter Twenty-Five

35. In the twenty-one years that Arthur has been King of England, what has he accomplished? How is Arthur viewed? Lancelot?
36. What has Gawaine finally managed to do? Which of his brothers join him at court?

Chapter Twenty-Six

37. Why does Arthur feel that his Table may have been a mistake? What does Lancelot say about Morgause that worries Arthur? Explain.
38. Why does Agravaire kill Morgause? Who kills Lamorak?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

39. What has the earlier Games-Mania and the recent murders of Morgause and Lamorak made Arthur realize about the Table? What does he plan to do to save the Table?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

40. When Gawaine returns to Camelot, what is his mood? Why does he feel this way?

Chapter Twenty-Nine

41. What prevents Lionel from killing his brother Bors? What significance does Arthur attach to the story?

Chapter Thirty

42. When Sir Aglovalle returns from the Quest, what does Arthur ask him to do? Why? What is Aglovalle's initial response? His final response?

Chapter Thirty-One

43. When Lancelot finally returns to Camelot after two years from the Holy Grail Quest, what news does Uncle Dap give Arthur?

Chapter Thirty-Two

44. What lesson does Lancelot tell Arthur and Guenever he has learned from the birds?
45. Although Lancelot wants to confess to Arthur about his love for Guenever, why doesn't he?
46. What does Lancelot finally realize is his own worst sin?

Chapter Thirty-Three

47. Explain what Lancelot means when he says he has at least been granted part of his desire regarding the Holy Grail.

Chapter Thirty-Four

48. What does White say is Guenever central tragedy? How might it account for her double love for Arthur and Lancelot?
49. What does Lancelot tell Guenever regarding their relationship? How does she react? Why?

Chapter Thirty-Five

50. What, according to White, is the eighth deadly sin? What effect does it have on Guenever and Lancelot? What is the result?

Chapter Thirty-Six

51. What four periods has the court passed through over the years?
52. What effect does this fourth period have on the court and, as a result, what tragedy occurs?

Chapter Thirty-Seven

53. What new idea has begun to form in Arthur's mind regarding Might? What will it eventually lead to?
54. Explain White's assertion that Lancelot is involved in an Eternal Quadrangle.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

55. Why does the relationship between Guenever and Lancelot continue to be strained?

Chapter Thirty-Nine

56. What exception does Lancelot make for Elaine during the tournament at Corbin?
57. How does Guenever react when Bors tells her that Lancelot has been wounded in the tournament?

Chapter Forty

58. Why does Elaine commit suicide?
59. How does Elaine unintentionally strike her only strong blow by committing suicide?

Chapter Forty-One

60. What attempt does Arthur finally make to assert his position in the Eternal Triangle? What is the result?
61. What errors in judgment do both Lancelot and Gareth make during the tournament?

Chapter Forty-Two

62. What is the result of Lancelot's coming to save Guenever from Sir Meliagrance? Why?

Chapter Forty-Three

63. Why does Sir Meliagrance challenge Lancelot to a fight?

Chapter Forty-Four

64. After Guenever gives the thumb down gesture to Lancelot, what odds does Lancelot give Sir Meliagrance? Why?

Chapter Forty-Five

65. What, after struggling for twenty-five years, is the situation among Lancelot, Guenever, and Arthur?

66. Why is Lancelot so distressed about the arrival of Sir Urre of Hungary? What is the result?

Part IV: The Candle in the Wind

Chapter One

1. What, according to Agravaine, is the only way for Mordred to gain revenge on Arthur?

2. Why is Mordred so determined to destroy Arthur?

Chapter Two

3. What is Gawaine's reaction to the announcement that Mordred and Agravaine plan to confront Arthur about Lancelot? What is the result?

Chapter Three

4. What, according to White, is ironic about historians' impudent use of the terms Dark and Middle Ages?

Chapter Four

5. After Arthur tells Guenever and Lancelot the truth about Mordred, what favor does he ask of them? What command does he give Lancelot? Why?

Chapter Five

6. What prediction does Gawaine make about the trouble Agravaine and Mordred want to stir up?

7. What does Arthur tell Mordred and Agravaine he hopes will happen in their attempt to catch Lancelot? What does he say he will personally do to them if they fail?

Chapter Six

8. Even though Gareth begs Lancelot not to go to the Queen, why does Lancelot feel that the warning is unnecessary?

Chapter Seven

9. How does Lancelot explain Agravaine's hatred of him? What comment does Guenever make about the people Agravaine hates?

10. Why does Guenever refuse to try to escape with Lancelot?

Chapter Eight

11. After Lancelot rescues Guenever, what does Arthur tell Gawaine he hopes he can arrange? What is Gawaine's reaction?

12. Who, according to Mordred, killed Gareth and Gaheris? Why are Arthur and Gawaine unable to believe what he tells them?

Chapter Nine

13. Why does Lancelot tell Guenever that even going back to England and having both their heads cut off will not stop the war?

14. What suggestion does Guenever make to Lancelot for ending the battle that has been raging for six months?

Chapter Ten

15. Who are the Thrashers, what is their symbol, and what are their aims? To whom is White comparing them?

16. What is the end result of the Pope's intervention into the war between Arthur and Lancelot?

17. What does Gawaine swear he will do? Why?

Chapter Eleven

18. Why does Guenever say that war is like fire? What, according to her, is war about?
19. What explanation does Guenever give for Arthur's siding with Gawaine against Lancelot?
20. What, according to White, is at the heart of tragedy? How does he apply this theory to Mordred?
21. Aside from proclaiming himself King of England, what other evil is Mordred contemplating? Why?

Chapter Twelve

22. Why does Gawaine refuse to end the war even though he has been injured and spared twice by Lancelot?
23. What observation does Gawaine make about Mordred's jealousy of Arthur?
24. What news does Guenever's letter contain? What is Arthur's reaction? Gawaine's?

Chapter Thirteen

25. What does the letter from Gawaine to Lancelot ask him to do?

Chapter Fourteen

26. What has Arthur learned about man from Merlyn? What has Arthur been forged to be?
27. What does Arthur conclude about the reasons wars are fought? What does he see as the solution to the problem of ending wars?
28. To what does Arthur compare his chivalric order of knighthood idea? To whom does he give the job of keeping the idea alive? How is this to be accomplished?
29. After Arthur awakens from his dream about Merlyn, what does he remember? What finally becomes very clear to him?
30. According to Arthur, wherein lies the hope of mankind? Why?
31. What is to happen to Arthur? To Lancelot? To Guenever? To Mordred?

Discussion Questions

1. Trace the development of Arthur's concept of a new ideal of chivalry, beginning with the foundation of the Knights of the Round Table.
2. In what three instances does the gore-crow (or carrion crow) appear in the story? How does White use it to foreshadow and to symbolize Arthur's downfall?
3. Compare the description of the unicorn to Arthur. What part does Agravaire play in the destruction of each?
4. Nearing the completion of his novel, White considered various titles for it such as "The Dreaming Kind," "The Ancient Wrong," and "Arthur Pendragon." How is the title White finally chose consistent with both the Arthurian legend and the tone on which White ends the book?
5. What evidence can be found in the novel that White was himself a pacifist during World War II?
6. Is Arthur's fate determined by destiny or free will?
7. Summarize Arthur's fears about the Holy Grail Quest. How can these same fears explain Arthur's own fate?
8. What view of education is presented in the novel?
9. What point of view does White assume in telling the story? Does his choice offer any advantages to the reader? To the author himself?
10. What conclusion might be drawn from White's abandonment of the high humor and fantasy that so predominantly prevail in Part I of the novel?
11. Does this novel offer anything relevant to the life of a modern twentieth century reader?