

Symbolism in the Legend of King Arthur

Name: _____

Date: _____

Complete the questions using the provided text.

Symbol #1: The Round Table

In Arthurian legend, when the knights gathered, those who sat at the head of table were perceived to have stature over the others. As time progressed, the knights started to feel envy or jealousy of those of higher rank. Sometimes, the knights fought over who sat where.

The Round Table was given to Arthur as Guinevere's dowry when they were married. To resolve the conflict among his knights, Arthur had them sit around this circular table. Now all the knights were equal, because no seat at the table was better than the other.

In his poetry, Sir Walter Scott describes some of the knights who were seated with Arthur at the Round Table:

*"There Galahad sat with manly grace,
Yet maiden meekness in his face;
There Morolt of the iron mace,
And love-lorn Tristrem there;
And Dinadam with lively glance,
And Lanval with the fairy lance,
And Mordred with his looks askance,
Brunor and Bevidere.
Why should I tell of numbers more?
Sir Cay, Sir Banier, and Sir Bore,
Sir Caradoc the keen,
The gentle Gawain's courteous lore,
Hector de Mares and Pellinore,
And Lancelot, that evermore
Look'd stol'n-wise on the Queen."*

Excerpt from Sir Walter Scott's "The Bridal of Triermain," ll. 13 available at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/trierma.htm>.

The table became the place where Arthur's Knights gathered, symbolizing equality, unity, and oneness.

Read the following questions. Discuss your responses in a group, and then write your thoughts in the spaces provided. When you are finished, discuss your reactions as a class.

- Why do you think equality, unity, and oneness were important to King Arthur?

- Have you ever been in an unfair or unequal situation? If so, describe what happened? How did you resolve the situation?

- Besides the Round Table, can you think of person, place, or thing that symbolizes equality, unity, and oneness? If so, what is it?

- If you found yourself in an unfair or confusing situation, how could you use your answer to question #3 to restore equality and clarity?

Symbol #2: King Arthur's Sword Excalibur

There are two legends that explain how Arthur receives his sword Excalibur. In one legend, young Arthur pulls the sword from a stone. His ability to pull the sword from the stone gives him ascendance to the throne. A second legend describes how Arthur and Merlin meet a woman at a lake. Merlin asks her to approach. Excalibur emerges from the lake, held by a mysterious hand. The woman takes the sword, the hand disappears, and she delivers the sword to Arthur.

*“There likewise I beheld Excalibur
Before him at his crowning borne, the sword
That rose from out the bosom of the lake,
And Arthur rowed across and took it—rich
With jewels, elfin Urim, on the hilt,
Bewildering heart and eye—the blade so bright
That men are blinded by it—on one side,
Graven in the oldest tongue of all this world,
‘Take me,’ but turn the blade and ye shall see,
And written in the speech ye speak yourself,
‘Cast me away!’ And sad was Arthur’s face
Taking it, but old Merlin counselled him,
‘Take thou and strike! the time to cast away
Is yet far-off.’ So this great brand the king
Took, and by this will beat his foemen down.”*

Excerpt from “The Coming of Arthur” excerpted from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* available at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/idyl-ca.htm>.

Consider the following statement:

Excalibur is a symbol of kingship, power, and responsibility.

Now, read the following questions. Discuss your responses in a group, then write your thoughts in the spaces provided. When you are finished, discuss your reactions as a class.

- Which of the two legends about Excalibur seems more powerful to you? Why?
- How do you think Arthur might have felt when he read the engraving on Excalibur?
- What other symbols of kingship, power, and responsibility can you think of?
- If you found yourself one day in a very powerful position, how would you use your influence? What would be your most powerful tool? Why?

Symbol #3: The Holy Grail

Much of Arthurian tradition hinges on the quest for the Grail. During the time of Arthur, the quest for the Grail represented the most important spiritual pursuit one could undertake, because the Grail itself possessed holy significance. For those who were able to find it and for those who were worthy enough to approach it, The Holy Grail possessed the ability to heal the sick and wounded, restore youth, and provide unlimited amounts of divine food.

*To whom the monk: "The Holy Grail!—I trust
We are green in Heaven's eyes; but here too much
We moulder—as to things without I mean—
Yet one of your own knights, a guest of ours,
Told us of this in our refectory,
But spake with such a sadness and so low
We heard not half of what he said. What is it?
The phantom of a cup that comes and goes?"*

*"Nay, monk! what phantom?" answered Percivale.
"The cup, the cup itself...and if a man
Could touch or see it, he was healed at once,
By faith, of all his ills. But then the times
Grew to such evil that the holy cup
Was caught away to Heaven, and disappeared."*

From "The Holy Grail," excerpted from Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* available at <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/idyl-grl.htm>.

Consider the following statement:

The Grail is a symbol of rebirth, perhaps even reincarnation—the passage from life to death and beyond.

Now, read the following questions. Discuss your responses in a group, then write your thoughts in the spaces provided. When you are finished, discuss your reactions as a class.

- What do you think the pursuit of The Holy Grail meant to Arthur's knights?
- Have you ever lost something really important, only to find it later? What happened? How did you feel?
- Can you think of any object today that might approach the significance of The Holy Grail?
- If you found an important object, such the one you suggested in question three, what would be your reaction? What would you do with it?