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An Antidote to War? An Examination of the Success of The Once and Future King by T.H. White

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La Salle University

An Antidote to War?

An Examination of the Success of *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White

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Abstract

This paper seeks to evaluate the level of success of *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White. It examines the financial success of the book and its popularity among readers, both immediately upon publication and in later years. It also considers the book within its historical context, during and after World War II, and hypothesizes that the war negatively impacted the success of the book since it has a pacifist agenda. Finally, the paper examines White's own goals and intentions while writing the book, and whether the book achieved those purposes. In order to study these matters, the text itself is closely analyzed, as well as private letters and diary entries of White and his friends. Book reviews and newspaper articles of the times of publication are also used to analyze the success of the book. The paper concludes that while White's book was hugely successful financially and very popular among readers, both immediately and in later years, it failed to achieve its purposes, which were to find a solution to the problem of war, and to help future generations avoid war.

Introduction

The Once and Future King, by Terence Hanbury White, is a fascinating book in many ways. Based upon *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, it takes the well-known story of King Arthur and his famous knights of the Round Table and re-tells it in a way that makes the characters more complex and three-dimensional. White makes them come alive; rather than being distant storybook kings and queens, the characters are human, with real, relatable thoughts and emotions. They are deeply flawed, tempted toward evil, and conflicted in their beliefs. Sometimes their actions are noble and heroic, like those of stereotypical royalty, but other times they are immature. The characters face many of the struggles that readers face today, and this is part of what makes *The Once and Future King* so compelling. One such struggle, which White emphasizes above all else, is the problem of war. Throughout the entire book, King Arthur fights in vain to maintain peace in his kingdom. No matter what he does, no matter how clever his strategies in preventing conflict, it inevitably erupts. The book ends exactly where it began, in chaos and fighting. It leaves the reader with a dismal feeling about human nature and the impression that as long as there are human beings living together in civilizations, there will be war.

White, a teacher, journalist, and author, was an ardent pacifist. Born in 1906, he lived through both World War I and World War II. According to biographer John K. Crane, war was one of the “great sadnesses of his life” (18-19). This sentiment toward war clearly comes through in *The Once and Future King*, which, as research into White’s private letters and diary entries reveals, was intentional. White wrote the book with an agenda, which was to teach readers about the causes of war and hopefully prevent further fighting. In *T.H. White: Letters to a Friend*, Francois Gallix writes, “the purpose of the books... [was] the search for an antidote to war”

(101). Through his book, he hoped to figure out how to stop war, and to warn future generations about its effects.

This paper seeks to examine White's specific goals and purposes in writing *The Once and Future King*, and to evaluate whether the book accomplished those ends. It also examines the success of the book in White's home country of England and in the United States, both at the time of publication and in later years. Various reviews of the book are examined, as well as exchanges with his friends and publishers. Portions of the text itself are critically analyzed, in addition to *The Book of Merlyn*, the fifth installment to *The Once and Future King*, which was published separately and posthumously. Each of these sources is placed within its historical context in order to understand public attitudes and perceptions about the work.

Since the books were published during England in World War II, it would make intuitive sense that public perception would not be favorable; White took a strongly anti-war position in the midst of a massive war, while his fellow countrymen were fighting desperately to keep their freedom and defeat Hitler. Theoretically, it would seem insensitive to have this attitude when England did not choose to fight for the sole purpose of fighting; it was forced, unwillingly, into war. Yet despite the context in which the books of *The Once and Future King* were published, they were immediately and largely successful. The people bought them and loved them, which is evident in the many favorable reviews which they received. In later years, they were also very popular; according to biographer Sylvia Townsend Warner, Disney made *The Sword in the Stone* into a cartoon, and White was also asked to write a play for the B.B.C. (285, 287). In the U.S., in the summer of 1958, *The Once and Future King* "was on the Ten Bestsellers List for three weeks running" (284). Even now, it is still immensely popular and well-known. James Piereson, writing in 2010, calls *The Once and Future King* "one of the most popular and widely read books of our

time” (190). It continues to enchant readers of all ages. *The Once and Future King* was successful during the time of its publication, and is still widely read today.

T.H. White and War

All throughout his adult life, White was a pacifist, both in thought and action. The fact that he lived through both World Wars played a large role in his feelings toward war; over the course of his life, he had a large amount of exposure to the horrors of violent conflict.

In *The Book of Merlyn*, White writes, about the aged king Arthur, “what he wanted... more than anything else – [was] only Peace” (72). This quotation can easily be read as an expression of one of White’s own deepest desires. War caused him huge amounts of mental and emotional stress; in fact, he did not even seem to understand it. In a 1941 letter to his friend David Garnett, he wrote, “My Death of Arthur is going to end up as a treatise on war... can you tell me if anybody has written a famous book about war?... about why people fight...” (Garnett 80). He wanted to make sense of it, to figure out exactly what part of human nature makes people fight each other. He moved from his home of England to Ireland in order to avoid being conscripted into World War II. He also wrote *The Once and Future King*, arguably his most famous work, about the problems with war and human nature.

When World War II broke out, White struggled to figure out what to do. He absolutely hated war and viewed it as completely evil, but understood that he could not ignore it entirely. An excerpt from *The Book of Merlyn* reveals White’s own feelings about the war; he writes, from the perspective of the weary old king Arthur, “He was an Englishman, and England was at war. However much he hated it, or willed to stop it, he was lapped round in a real but intangible sea of English feeling which he could not control” (71). White felt very conflicted and had a

difficult time trying to figure out what to do. He wrote to Garnett in January of 1939, “If only I can get out of this doomed country before the crash, I shall be happy. Two years of worry on this subject have convinced me that I had better run for my life, and have a certain right to do so. I may just as well do this as shoot myself on the outbreak of hostilities. I don't like war, I don't want war, and I didn't start it” (Garnett 39). White evidently spent a long time – “two years of worry,” to be exact – thinking about his decision to leave. In the letter, he sounds like he is trying to convince both Garnett and himself that his decision is the right one. It is full of justifications, tinged with guilt. White does not want to abandon his “doomed country,” but he does not want to be involved in a war either. Besides, he was not the one who started it. He defensively argues that it is not his fault, and, therefore, not his problem.

Although White ultimately decided to flee to Ireland to escape conscription, this decision was not an easy one. Gallix writes, “he could never quite reconcile his absence with his patriotic need to serve” (*Letters to a Friend* 100). In 1938, he wrote to Garnett, looking for a “sensible job in this wretched war... I have enough money to run away to America... But for some reason I can't manage to... my last hope is that there may be some constructive department even in war, and that somebody could get me into it” (Garnett 34). It is evident that White was extremely conflicted about his role in the war; he did not want to fight, but he could not bring himself to flee entirely; as Warner writes, “...his heart was bruised by a sense of obligation to the simple and dutiful who would fight without questioning” (22). White held onto the hope that he could find a way to do something productive in the war. In 1941, he wrote, “I want to do something about the war... I offered services to the British Council before the war and to the Ministry of Information at its outbreak... but they did not want me” (Garnett 91). White truly did want to

help his country in some way, to be genuinely useful, but for a while was unable to figure out how.

Eventually, he realized that he could use his natural gift for writing to help fight the war. In 1938, Garnett had written, “The most important work in this war is propaganda” (34). White took these words to heart. He wrote “an epic about war, one of whose morals is that Hitler is the kind of chap one has to stop... Intelligent people will understand that I am stopping Hitler much better by writing such books than by coming to England.” (Garnett 103). White believed that it was better to resist Hitler by using his unique talents, which could actually influence the way people thought about war, than by being one of millions to die on a battlefield. In a 1939 letter to Sydney Cockerell, he wrote, “My most important business is to finish my version of Malory... I cannot finish it if dead; I am the only person who can finish it... anybody can throw bombs” (Warner 123). Clearly White viewed his story as crucial, referring to it as his “most important business.” Whether or not writing the book was as effective as stopping Hitler as he believed, he genuinely thought it was making a difference. He wrote to Garnett in 1939, “The human race is fundamentally beastly wherever it is, and it is your job to make it less so. You are best at doing this by writing books” (Garnett 51). *The Once and Future King* ends with Arthur in his tent saying something very similar to the character Thomas Malory; while Malory wants to fight in the battle the next day, Arthur tells him to go write instead – to tell the story of the battle and its causes, so that future generations can avoid making the same mistakes. The solution to war, White believed, is literature.

The Text

The Once and Future King is actually composed of four distinct books, written and originally published in different years: *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), *The Witch in the Wood* (1939), later renamed *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940), and *The Candle in the Wind* (1940). The four stories were published together in 1958 as a single novel, *The Once and Future King*. A fifth book, *The Book of Merlyn*, was published posthumously in 1977. White wrote *The Once and Future King* beginning during the circumstances leading up to the outbreak of World War II and ending during the Cold War. For those living in England, like White, the war was inescapable. As he himself wrote, “We are suffering in propaganda instead of gas, slowly feeling our minds go dead” (Warner 155). Although he ended up moving to Ireland to flee from the war, it still affected him deeply as he was writing his Arthurian tetralogy.

Based upon Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* (1485), *The Once and Future King* tells the story of King Arthur and his famous knights of the Round Table. White’s re-telling closely follows the events in and, for the most part, remains true to Malory’s original text. However, White’s version has a clear anti-war agenda. In a letter to friend David Garnett, White wrote, “The epic is really a book on war, and how to prevent it. Also it is a book on the next peace” (Garnett 93). Throughout the story, Arthur struggles to maintain a lasting peace in his kingdom, trying several different tactics; in the article “T.H. White, ‘The Once and Future King,’ and the Scientific Method,” Jake La Jeunesse argues that “*The Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlyn* should be viewed as a literary science experiment in which White attempts to engage the subject of war with the intent of producing a real-world solution” (23). White is very methodical in his approach to solving the problem of war; he has Arthur test multiple theories about peace, none of which work for any significant amount of time. He went about writing his

“treatise on war” scientifically, doing meticulous research. He analyzed the behaviors of geese and ants, raised goshawks, and even compared the brains of various animal species to those of humans, trying to see if a certain part of the brain causes belligerence.

In one letter to Garnett, White described the full story arc of *The Once and Future King*, and what each book would say about war. He wrote:

The epic theme is War and how to stop it... the Round Table was an anti-Hitler measure. It began by trying to control Might-as-Right in individuals, by harnessing it to worldly ends: then, in the Grail, it tried to harness it to spiritual ends: then... it recognises that Might-as-Right must be quashed altogether, instead of harnessed, and Arthur turns over to abstract justice -- he invents ‘Law’... and is prepared to sacrifice both Lancelot and Guenever to the ideal. This works, so far as Might in the individual is concerned, but... collective Might, War, pops up behind him. All his life he was trying to dam a flood which broke out in new places. (86)

First, Arthur uses force to destroy the various lords who will not accept his legitimacy as king. This does not take care of the internal problem of his own people, who have an insatiable desire to use violence, so Arthur comes up with the Round Table, a chivalric order of knights who use their fighting skills for good. Yet this dissolves into petty competition and jealousy, so Arthur sends his knights on the Quest for the Holy Grail, hoping that diverting their energies toward a religious, wholesome purpose will help. This only exacerbates the jealousy, and, even worse, all the morally good knights die, leaving the petty, violent ones behind. Finally, Arthur institutes an impersonal code of Law. He hopes that its equal treatment of all citizens will handle problems within the kingdom in a fair way, yet Mordred uses the system to convict Guenever of high treason and tear the entire kingdom apart. The book ends with Arthur and Mordred fighting a

massive battle and dying, and everything is chaos. At the end of the story, the reader is left with a dismal, pessimistic view of human nature; it seems that White is suggesting that it is impossible for human beings to live peacefully together. Their very nature will always cause them to end up in war or conflict.

The Sword in the Stone

The story begins with Arthur as a young boy, nicknamed the Wart. Throughout *The Sword in the Stone*, the sorcerer Merlyn gives the Wart an education designed to teach him to think morally and unselfishly. Merlyn places the Wart into the bodies of several different species of animals so he can learn about their social and political relationships and compare them to those of humans. Later, as a new ruler, the Wart begins to think through these lessons for himself and use them to govern his kingdom. The most important concept that Merlyn wants the Wart to learn and understand is that Might is not always Right, or that using pure force and violence for their own sake is immoral. Rather, a ruler should try to maintain peace above all, and protect the well-being of his subjects.

The Wart's first lesson is about the dangers of tyrannical monarchy and abuse of power, and the first animal that he becomes is a fish, in the castle moat. He specifically chooses a perch, because, as he announces, "they are braver than the silly roach, and not quite so slaughterous as the pike are" (White, *The Once and Future King* 38). This simple statement immediately reveals much about Arthur's character; even as a young boy, he values bravery. Additionally, he already has enough wisdom to understand that there must be a balance between power and decency; it is important to be courageous, but to use this courage and strength for good and not just to mercilessly kill. Interestingly, the perch is described as being "a beautiful olive-green," with "an

attractive whitish color” on his belly, both of which are colors that represent peace. However, he also has “scratchy plate-armour all over him... his back was armed with a splendid great fin that could be erected for war and had spikes in it” (39). These characteristics are more militaristic, reminiscent of a soldier. The fish that the Wart has chosen has characteristics evocative of both war and peace, symbolizing his future identity as a ruler. He will need strength and power to defend his kingdom from enemies, but will also have a noble desire to maintain beauty and peace in his kingdom.

As the Wart and Merlyn, who has become a tench, swim around and explore the depths of the moat, Merlyn decides to introduce the Wart to “Mr. P.,” the “King of the Moat” (44). Merlyn tells the Wart that he will “see what it is to be a king,” but ominously warns him to keep his tail bent “in case he is feeling tyrannical” (44). Mr. P., a pike, is portrayed as intimidating and not very approachable, an “old despot” with a face “ravaged by all the passions of an absolute monarch -- by cruelty, sorrow, age, pride, selfishness, loneliness and thoughts too strong for individual brains... He was remorseless, disillusioned, logical, predatory, fierce, pitiless -- but his... eye was that of a stricken deer, large, fearful, sensitive and full of griefs” (44). It is clear from this description that although he is immensely powerful, Mr. P. is quite unhappy. He is weary and worn out from the mental and physical toll taken by years of cruelty, selfishness, and greed. Maintaining absolute power requires a monarch to be ruthless, and the “old despot” has had to do a large amount of killing in order to survive. The intense pressure of being a ruler is “too strong for individual brains” to understand; power is a burden, and he is completely alone in shouldering it. Mr. P. also has to endure the constant fear of usurpation; being the most powerful means that there is always a target on his back, and others are continuously looking for opportunities to exploit any potential weaknesses and overthrow him.

When Merlyn encourages the Wart to ask Mr. P. about power, the pike replies, “Love is a trick played on us by the forces of evolution. Pleasure is the bait laid down by the same. There is only power. Power is of the individual mind, but the mind’s power is not enough. Power of the body decides everything in the end, and only Might is Right” (45). This response underscores the pike’s unhappiness; to him, love and pleasure are nothing more than “a trick,” or “bait,” which distract from power, the only thing that matters. Furthermore, the only type of relevant power is that “of the body,” or brute force; power “of the mind” is too weak, or “not enough.” Pure, ruthless force, or “might” is the only way to survive, at least according to the tyrant.

As the Wart listens to the pike, in a “hypnotized” trance, the monarch slowly moves closer and closer, his ever-widening jaws full of razor-sharp teeth. He warns the Wart, “I really think you might be wise to go away this moment. Indeed, I think you ought to put your back into it” (45). Although the pike has been in a somewhat civilized conversation with the Wart until this point, his overwhelming urge to kill takes over. He is so used to remorselessly preying upon others that he cannot control his own greed; the obsession with power has permanently damaged his psyche and become a part of his nature. A small, merciful part of the pike seems to want to let the Wart get away, but he cannot actually control himself, and so he has to settle for a warning. The Wart is only able to escape “at the last second” (45). To the pike, power is everything, and it is based on fear and intimidation. Nothing matters or exists except power for the sake of power; Might alone is Right. The pike’s example of absolute monarchy seems “horrible” to the Wart, because it displays a complete lack of balance and a tendency toward ruthless violence and cruelty.

The next lesson that Merlyn teaches the Wart does not place him into the body of an animal, but it does emphasize man’s tendency toward pointless or unjustified violence. Like

many young boys, the Wart is fascinated by the glory of knighthood; he dreams of being a “knight errant” who lives “out of doors” and never does “anything but joust and go on quests and bear away the prize at tournaments” (53). It seems so desirable to him that he has to struggle “not to cry” with the knowledge that he will not be a knight since he is “not a proper son of Sir Ector’s” (53). Merlyn, by contrast, views knighthood as stupid, exclaiming, “A lot of brainless unicorns swaggering about and calling themselves educated just because they can push each other off a horse with a bit of stick!” (52). To him, knowledge and learning are much more useful and important than brute force. Nevertheless, he agrees to let the Wart “see some real knights errant,” for “the sake of... education” (53). The Wart enthusiastically chooses King Pellinore, who soon appears along with Sir Grummore to joust. There is no real reason for them to fight; they agree to joust simply because jousting is something that knights do. White sarcastically refers to the spectacle as a “terrible battle;” although the two appear to be fighting vigorously, they also exchange amusingly civil comments, such as Pellinore politely apologizing after Sir Grummore accuses him of using improper grammar (58). The fight itself is ridiculous; because of their excessively heavy armor, the pair struggle to build up speed and control their horses, and both soon end up on the ground, “sitting side by side... while their horses cantered off in opposite directions” (59). Eventually, the physical fight deteriorates into a comical verbal yelling match, the two resorting to immature name-calling and insults such as “‘You’re a cad’... ‘No, I’m not’... ‘Yes, you are’” (62). The two knights make the concept of “Might is Right” seem nonsensical and absurd; they are violently fighting literally just for the sake of fighting. This lesson demonstrates the tendency of human beings toward dumb, pointless violence.

Interestingly, during the fight, the Wart expresses a considerable amount of concern for the well-being of the knights. Once he realizes that his fanciful dream of seeing knights joust has

actually become a potentially bloody reality, he feels “ashamed that his bloodthirstiness had been responsible for making these two knights joust before him” (59). He worries that they will actually kill each other, shuts his eyes when the two collide, and says, “I hope they don’t hurt themselves” (59). Although he is captivated by the glamorous idea of knighthood, its violent reality is disturbing to him. He does not want to see anyone actually get hurt, and knows that he will be responsible if anything terrible happens to the knights. This scene emphasizes another crucial aspect of the Wart’s identity as future king; he does not truly enjoy violence for the sake of violence, and wants to protect people from harm. He is just beginning to understand that with power comes responsibility; if he places people in danger because of his own selfish whims, the awful consequences that may result will fall on his shoulders.

Next, Merlyn allows the Wart to visit the hawks, who are portrayed as soldiers. They are “mainly trained by hunger” and “do not really understand that they are prisoners, any more than the cavalry officers do. They look upon themselves as being dedicated to their profession, like an order of knighthood or something of that sort” (68). The hawks are committed to their job, which they view as noble. They are proud and willing to sacrifice themselves, even though they are technically prisoners who are being forced to serve; they talk about “how they were taken, about what they can remember of their homes: about... the great deeds of their ancestors... It is military conversation” (68). Although the hawks have not chosen to become soldiers, they have accepted the profession and willingly do their duty. This description is evocative of soldiers in the beginning of the first and second world wars; while they were involuntarily drafted to go to war, taken away from their homes and families, and forced to endure hunger, many of them willingly and dutifully accepted the job with pride. They did not see themselves as prisoners,

even though they were being forced to serve, fight, and die for those in power. They simply did their duty.

Among the relatively calm, disciplined hawks, however, there is a “choleric infantry colonel” named Cully who appears to show signs of insanity (71). He mutters about the “damned administration. Damned politicians. Damned bolsheviks. Is this a damned dagger that I see before me, the handle toward my hand?” (71). While the other hawks dutifully accept their responsibilities as soldiers, Cully cynically complains about the government and the politicians responsible for inciting violence. He seems much older than the others, as well as psychologically damaged from everything that he has experienced, similar to a veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder. Another hawk describes Cully as “not quite right in his wits” due to “the constant strain of living up to... [the commander’s] standard” (73). He feels the pressure to fight, but does not necessarily want to do so, similar to the way in which Shakespeare’s Macbeth knows he needs to use the “dagger... the handle toward my hand” in order to commit murder, but struggles with the actual killing. The hawk understands the horror and reality of war and violence, and is evidence that they are psychologically damaging. From spending time with the hawks, the Wart begins to understand how rulers can negatively impact the minds and situations of their subjects, and how it is a ruler’s moral responsibility to use this power wisely.

The Wart’s next lesson about power comes when Merlyn transforms him into an ant. The ants are “belligerent,” and represent totalitarianism. They live in a fortress, and the first thing that the Wart notices is an notice that says, “EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY” (115). He immediately feels a sense of foreboding even though he does not understand the meaning, and perceives the tunnel as “sinister” (115). Soon, the Wart becomes aware of a noise in his head, like a “wireless broadcast” (115). It is “monotonous,” with rhyming

words that continually repeat and make the Wart feel “sick inside” (116). He also becomes conscious of a voice in his head giving directions, but the voice is “impersonal... dead” (116). As he continues exploring, the Wart comes across an ant struggling to correctly position three dead ants. Rather than “thinking things out in advance,” the ant patiently, robotically relies “on a series of accidents to achieve its object” (117). The Wart, watching in frustration, wants to ask the ant why it behaves this way, but helplessly realizes that he cannot ask this or any question; in fact, in the ant language, there are “no words” for what he wants to say (117). When the ant addresses the Wart and asks what he is doing, to which he responds, “I am not doing anything,” the ant is “baffled” and transmits a report that the Wart is “an insane ant” -- except instead of those words, he uses the phrase “Not-Done” (117). The only thing that matters in the ant society is whether one is doing his duty; not to be doing anything is to be crazy. The only measure of value for something is whether it is done; “Done” and “Not-Done” are the “only two qualifications in the language” (118). It is clear that the ant society is extremely limiting; the ants do not think for themselves, and their language inherently denies them the ability to express any specific, substantial thoughts, opinions, or questions. In fact, “a question... [is] a sign of insanity to them” (121). Originality and freedom of thought do not exist.

The ant society also has other unmistakable parallels to a totalitarian regime. There is a dictator with a cult of personality, who effectively uses propaganda to brainwash her followers. The dictator is “the Leader,” who has ruthlessly and violently taken power by slowly sawing off the head of her predecessor. She sits “complacently... attending to the broadcasts, issuing directions or commanding executions” (120). Yet the masses love her, referring to her as “Mammy,” calling her “wonderful,” and surrounding her with a “sea of adulation” (121). She broadcasts the “Mammy song” constantly, which the ants perceive as “lovely [done],” even

though the song only consists of the word “Mammy” repeated over and over (121). The Leader has a tight grip over the minds and actions of her people, just as dictators such as Stalin or Kim Jong Un have created cults of personality in order to maintain absolute control. The ants will not protest the regime for fear of execution, but, at the same time, they genuinely like the Leader because she has carefully portrayed herself as completely “done.”

The Leader uses the power she has over the masses in order to induce them to fight wars without protesting. When an ant from the other nest invades theirs, the Leader changes the *Mammy* broadcast to “*Antland, Antland Over All*” in order to inspire rabid nationalism, a not-so-subtle allusion to the use of the imperialist “*Deutschland, Deutschland Uber Alles*” in Nazi Germany (121). White also alludes to religious justifications for invasion of the another ‘country,’ writing, “Ant the Father had ordained in his wisdom that Othernest pismires should always be the slaves of Thisnest ones.” (121). This sounds exactly like the ridiculous nineteenth-century justifications for slavery that claim God created certain races inherently superior to others, or like Hitler’s claim that the superiority of the Aryan race allowed Germany to invade other countries for *lebensraum*, or living space. White is clearly mocking these justifications for war and imperialism. The passage continues, describing another broadcast: “A. We are more numerous than they are, therefore we have a right to their mash. B. They are more numerous than we are, therefore they are wickedly trying to steal our mash” (122). The contradiction here is obvious and absurd; the Leader’s justifications for war are completely illogical. By ironically mocking the Leader’s broadcasts, White is making a statement about similar real-life justifications for war and imperialism. It is not morally acceptable for a leader to harm people, whether they are the leader’s own citizens or those of the opposing nation. White paints a horrifying picture of the violent and individuality-sapping reality of totalitarianism.

After showing the Wart one of the worst possible examples of power in the hands of an unjust and immoral ruler, Merlyn provides the Wart with an example of peaceful, democratic government. The geese are the refreshing antithesis of the ants; they are cheerful and inquisitive, celebrate individuality and talent, elect leaders based on merit, and never fight one another. The geese have “comradeship, free discipline and *joie de vivre*” during morning flight exercises, and the Wart feels “at peace” (160). They play games, and are “in good humour, so cheerful... teasing one another” (165, 168). Life for the geese is happy and fun. They are all different and have unique personalities; when the squadrons sing, each is in a “different voice, some larking, some triumphant, some in sentiment or glee” (161). They are individuals, and they are free. Election of leaders, or admirals, comes about “spontaneously;” if a goose is older and has migration experience, the others will follow him voluntarily. The geese have no concept of war; in fact, when the Wart tries to explain the concept to a goose, she perceives it as an “obscene suggestion” and says, “What a horrible mind you must have!... what creature could be so low as to go about in bands, to murder others of its own blood?” (163). The goose’s definition of war is shocking and gruesome, but it is entirely true. White forces the reader to view war in a new light, to see it for what it is. The goose continues, “There are no boundaries...” and defines boundaries as “imaginary lines on the earth” (163). The thought of murdering those of one’s blood over imaginary lines makes war seem incredibly illogical, and this is White’s intent. Everything about the geese’s way of life makes simple, logical sense, and it sharply contrasts with the dysfunctional human tendency toward war.

The Wart’s final lesson comes from a very scholarly badger. After a discussion of creation and the dominance of man over the rest of the animals, the conversation moves to war. The badger asks the Wart, “Do you know that *Homo sapiens* is almost the only animal which

wages war?... Out of the hundreds of thousands of species, I can only think of seven which are belligerent... True warfare is rarer in nature than cannibalism” (187). This piece of information is quite shocking, which is probably White’s intention. The Wart, however, is unfazed. He replies, “Personally... I should have liked to go to war, if I could have been made a knight...” (187). Despite the lessons from the pike, the knights, and the ants, the horrible nature of war has not actually sunk in yet. The Wart is still quite immature, and war still seems glamorous. The badger, after lapsing into deep thought, replies, “Which did you like best... the ants or the wild geese?” (187). The chapter ends and the reader is left with an unsettled feeling, because it is clear that the badger has made a good point, yet the reality is that human beings do still fight wars and murder one another.

A few years pass, and the Wart grows into a young man. In an effort to help his brother Kay in a jousting tournament, he searches the town for a sword, since Kay has left his at home (196). He comes across one in a quiet churchyard, “a heavy stone with an anvil on it, and a fine new sword... stuck through the anvil” (196). As he tugs on it, he says out loud, “Come, sword... I must cry your mercy and take you for a better cause... It is not for me, but for Kay. I will bring it back” (197). He does not want the sword for his own glory or to become king, but simply to help his brother. Because of his pure, innocent intentions, he is able to pull the famous sword out of the stone. To his dismay, when he shows Sir Ector, his father kneels “with difficulty,” addressing the Wart as king (199-200). From that point forward, everything about the Wart’s life is to be different and more formal. He is crowned, and assumes the duties of King Arthur of England. With that, the book ends.

The Sword in the Stone was published in August of 1938. As Warner writes, this was “the month of the Munich Crisis. Hitler was about to invade Czechoslovakia, whose integrity England

and France were pledged to preserve” (108). The Munich Crisis was the period of time during 1938 in which the major European powers, including Britain, negotiated with Hitler about the Sudetenland, an area of Czechoslovakia. Eventually, in September of that year, in an attempt to use the policy of appeasement to pacify Hitler, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain agreed to allow Hitler to annex the Sudetenland despite the fact that Britain and France had agreed to protect it. According to Steve Ellis in his article “Literature and the Munich Crisis,” the crisis had “a profound effect on a host of writers, commentators, and the general public in Britain” and “prompted a vigorous dissension between those who supported the peace, or at least postponement of war... and those who for various reasons contested the appeasement policy and what was seen as the shameful betrayal of Czechoslovakia” (36-37). White wrote and published *The Sword in the Stone* during this troubled time, and, to an extent war undermined its success. As Warner writes, about the praise from reviewers and the money that White earned, “Circumstances devalued this” (108). The book’s success was somewhat overshadowed by the international instability created by the Munich Crisis.

Yet despite the level of tension in the world, the book was immediately very successful. According to Garnett, in 1938, “*The Sword in the Stone*... [was] chosen in America as Book of the Month” (29). There were B.B.C. radio “broadcasts on Sunday afternoons, starting 11 June 1939” (Gallix, *T.H. White: An Annotated Bibliography* 18). White himself wrote in 1941, “I am a best seller in America where I have sold getting on for a quarter of a million books... I have broadcast and been serialised by the B.B.C., have a contract with W. Disney and I am in this year’s Who’s Who...” (Garnett 92). In England, the book also did very well; as Warner writes, “The English edition of *The Sword in the Stone* came out in August. It had great praise from reviewers who liked it... and by September White noted that he had nearly £500 in the bank”

(108). The success of White's books, especially *The Sword in the Stone*, made White considerably wealthy; in 1938, he wrote, "...they gave me all this money... I am a millionaire" (Garnett 30-32). In an amusing letter to L.J. Potts, he wrote in 1939, "As usual I am writing to you when in trouble... I have one or two thousand pounds: a distressing circumstance to which I am by no means accustomed, and I don't know what to do with the stuff" (Gallix, *Letters to a Friend* 102-103). The first book of the tetralogy was immediately successful both in the United States and in England.

This success is perhaps due to the fact that *The Sword in the Stone* has a very naïve, childish tone. In a letter to Garnett, White writes, "Sword in the Stone is like Wood Magic. It is poetry: it is for children" (Garnett 83). It is filled with humor, and, while it does have some strong political messages, its content is not very dark overall. Much of the political message could probably slide right over a young reader's head. As Crane points out, "a Walt Disneyish aura still surrounds *The Sword in the Stone*." It was relatively innocent when it was first published, a simple children's book about the boyhood adventures of King Arthur. As Arthurian expert Alan Lupack writes, "The turning of Arthur into various animals, the adventure with Robin Hood, the talking owl Archimedes, Merlin's botched spells – all are the stuff of a tale for young readers" (108). Critical book reviews of the time period tended to echo this statement; as reviewer Hassoldt Davis wrote in *Nation* in 1939, the book was "one of the soundest and most delightful fictions of early England that we have had. It is a wondrous tale, full of humor and beauty, with no plot and no sermon, and should serve well as a prophylactic against the dyspeptic news of our own day" (39). Davis viewed the book as a soothing cure for the depressing circumstances of the time, as "delightful," "wondrous," full of innocent "humor and beauty." The political, anti-war messages were evidently not too heavy or obnoxious for adult readers of

the time, as Davis describes the book as lacking a “sermon.” As Crane writes, “White obscured the central purpose with an enormous amount of comedy and satire directed at the Arthurian legend” (86). *The Sword in the Stone* was not preachy, but rather a simple, fun tale that readers could take at face value during a time of great international strife.

The Queen of Air and Darkness, or The Witch in the Wood

White’s next installment in *The Once and Future King* is *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, and it covers the early years of King Arthur’s rule. When he first becomes king, Arthur is incredibly naïve, and is reliant upon his tutor Merlyn, who compares him to a “schoolboy” (White, *The Once and Future King* 216). Arthur has the world at his feet, literally “laid out” below him “like a toy” as he peers downward from the top of a tall keep. He has immense power, and no one to check that power. After winning a battle, he flippantly says, “Well, I must say it is nice to be a king. It was a splendid battle” (215). He is entirely oblivious to his own ignorance. When Merlyn becomes angry, he defensively continues, “It was a jolly battle, and I won it myself, and it was fun” (217). He has no perception of the violent horrors of war, because he, as a king, is insulated from them. But then Merlyn mentions the shocking number of kerns that were killed, and Arthur realizes that the battle was not, in fact, fun. Merlyn points out that chivalry only means:

...being rich enough to have a castle and a suit of armour, and then... you make the Saxon people do what you like... the result is that the country is devastated. Might is Right, that’s the motto... look at the country. Look at the barns burnt, and dead men’s legs sticking out of ponds, and horses with swelled bellies by the roadside, and mills falling down...” (219).

Merlyn describes, in gruesome detail, the carnage that Arthur's 'fun' war has inflicted upon his subjects. His selfishness has ruined hundreds of innocent lives, but he, the one who started the war, has not suffered any of its consequences. Arthur finally realizes that he "ought to have thought of the people who had no armour," and that maybe "Might isn't Right" (219). He is beginning to understand that every human life, even if it is poor or weak, has value, and that, as the ruler of the kingdom, it is his responsibility to protect these lives.

With that realization, Arthur tries to think of ways to maintain peace in his kingdom for the good of his subjects. He talks to Merlyn about human nature, arguing that people have an inherent tendency to be violent and use force; he says, "...there is a lot of Might knocking about in the world... It is as if people were half horrible and half nice...when they are left to themselves they run wild" (240). Yet just because this tendency is part of human nature does not mean that it is right; Arthur knows that something must be done about it if there is to be peace in his kingdom. He continues, asking, "Why can't you harness Might so that it works for Right?... The Might is there... and you can't neglect it.... but you might be able to direct it... so that it was useful instead of bad" (241). He comes up with the idea of the Round Table, a "sort of order of chivalry" (241). He says, "We shall have to make it a great honour... fashionable... Everybody must want to be in. And then I shall make the oath of the order that Might is only to be used for Right" (241). Instead of wreaking havoc throughout the countryside by raping, killing, and pillaging, Arthur's knights will "be bound to strike only on behalf of what is good, to defend virgins... to help the oppressed and so forth" (241). Arthur will channel the knights' violent spirit into something good, in order to establish and maintain peace. Furthermore, in order to prevent jealousy among the knights, Arthur decides to make the table round so that no

one has a higher place than anyone else. The king is very idealistic, and naively hopes that his new idea will put an end to senseless, widespread violence in his kingdom.

In *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, White stresses the horror of war and makes it very clear that it is almost never morally justifiable. Merlyn tells Arthur that there is only one acceptable reason for fighting, which is “if the other man starts it... [wars] are so wicked that they must not be allowed. When you can be perfectly certain that the other man started them... you might have a sort of duty to stop him” (226). Arthur protests, wondering whether a starving nation might have the right to fight its way out, but Merlyn is persistent. He insists, “A murderer... is not allowed to plead that his victim was rich and oppressing him – so why should a nation be allowed to? Wrongs have to be redressed by reason, not by force” (227). Here, White is using Merlyn to express his own views on war, which are clear. There is no excuse for fighting, other than to end a war that someone else has started.

Arthur also asks whether it is acceptable for a king who has discovered a beneficial new way of living decides to use war to force his new way upon the people if they refuse to comply. Merlyn replies, “There was such a man... an Austrian who... tried to impose his reformation by the sword, and plunged the civilized world into misery and chaos. But... he had had a predecessor in the reformation business, called Jesus Christ... he made it clear that the business of the philosopher was to make ideas *available*, and *not* to impose them on people” (261). The Austrian is Adolf Hitler, and this would have been immediately recognized and very poignant to people reading *The Queen of Air and Darkness* when it was published in 1939. In that year, Hitler had already been in power for six years, during which he had created and put into use the first concentration camps, burned books and banned ideas that did not mesh with his fascist ideology, and enacted discriminatory laws against Jews. World War II also began that year.

Readers would have been well aware of the dangers of Hitler's reformatations, so Merlyn's statement would have resonated in some way. According to literary critic Elisabeth Brewer, White "projected himself as Merlyn" (22). Therefore, it can plausibly be argued that many of Merlyn's statements, such as this one, are White's own actual opinions. To White, it is never acceptable to start a war or to force ideas upon people using violence, even if one truly believes that his ideas are good for them.

The Queen of Air and Darkness was originally published, in 1939, with the title *The Witch in the Wood*. Like *The Sword in the Stone*, it immediately did well, though apparently not quite as well as the first book. Reviewer Clifton Fadiman writes in a *New Yorker* review: "...there's nothing here as funny as the best things in 'The Sword in the Stone' or as moving... but those who savored the first book may want to try the sequel. It's not unamusing" (69). It is clear that the second book is not quite as humorous as that of the first. In another review, William Grace of the *Commonweal* writes, "...[he] reaches a very high degree of banality" (121). A *New York Times* review by Beatrice Sherman in 1939 reads: "...it shares the disadvantages inherent in most sequels. It is a gay and buoyant book, but the author's gusty style doesn't hit the reader with the full force of the first volume's fresh impact" (98). The book had its merits, but it was not nearly as good as the first, according to many reviewers.

Perhaps this lack of success is partially due to the fact that *The Queen of Air and Darkness* is much darker in both tone and content than the lighthearted first book. It deals with very heavy subject matter, such as racial conflict, maternal abuse and neglect of young children, incest, and murder. As Crane writes, *The Queen of Air and Darkness* "is far more directly philosophic and potentially tragic... the tenor has now swung toward a consideration of the impending doom in Arthur's life" (86-87). Furthermore, the book was "written in the year when

Hitler was first threatening England,” so it “clearly draws heavily upon White’s personal reflections during this period about his own duty to join or avoid the British armed forces” (Crane 88). Arthur, at first, believes that battles are “fun,” because he is a king and does not have to risk death or even injury. Merlyn has to make him understand that war is terrible and that Might is not Right, and, throughout the rest of the book, Arthur brainstorms ways to stop the fighting in his kingdom. In addition to all this darkness, the book also has a truly evil villain in Morgause. She is horrible to her children, gruesomely tortures and kills an innocent pet cat for her own entertainment, and manipulates Arthur into sleeping with her, conceiving the child who will grow up to become his downfall. Crane writes, “things exist in the universe to love her and for her to destroy... She becomes... the symbol of uncontrollable, ideal-wrecking fate” (93). With this cruel villain, as well as the dark tone and subject matter, it is no wonder that there is not much room left for humor.

White himself did not even seem to like his own book. In a 1940 letter to David Garnett, he writes, “My second volume, called *The Witch in the Wood*, is just out in England. If you have not already read it, don’t, but wait till I can lend you a copy... I shall then ask you to... blue-pencil the shoddy passages for me... The present publication is only in the nature of artist’s proofs” (Garnett 67). White knew that the book had many flaws and was unfinished. When he first sent the manuscript to Collins, “they returned it” because “they had discovered... that... Morgause, Arthur’s half-sister, was in actuality White’s mother who had come alive in the novel as a hated person rather than a hateful character” (Crane 86). White’s mother, Constance, emotionally mistreated him and contributed to his psychological issues; in another letter to Garnett, he writes, “I really cannot advise you to put yourself in my mother’s power by proximity... Every time I have to write to her even, it is like being mildly crucified” (Garnett

85). Writing about Morgause, or Constance, bothered him so much that he had to write *The Witch in the Wood* four separate times (Garnett 87). In addition to the trouble with writing about his mother, White could not fully focus on *The Witch in the Wood* and found writing it “a chore” because, according to Crane, he “was already thinking about the Lancelot volume and... also despised redoing what he had thought already done” (86). He just wanted to be finished with it. By the time he finished re-writing it, he had cut out so much about Morgause that she “had fallen too far from view” and the book was too “loosely structured” and “structurally confused” (Crane 86-87). As a result of these combined factors, the second book in the tetralogy did not turn out nearly as well as the first – although it did still do well, and many readers enjoyed it.

The Ill-Made Knight

Like *The Witch in the Wood*, *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940) also suffered from a lack of attention while White was writing it. Crane writes, “*The Ill-Made Knight* showed signs of divided attention” because White had been “feeling compelled to push forward” with writing it while he was struggling to finish *The Witch in the Wood* (86). However, *The Ill-Made Knight*, like the first two books, was quite successful upon publication. A review by Olive White in the *Christian Science Monitor* refers to it as “Mr. White’s best work to date” (11). This is a very strong statement, considering the tremendous success of *The Sword in the Stone*. Crane asserts that the book is “better than” *The Witch in the Wood* “in every way” (99). He continues, “though I still feel that *The Ill-Made Knight* is not quite the achievement that *The Sword in the Stone* is, it certainly represents White’s finest attempt at complex characterization... A compelling book, this novel is the core of the tetralogy in terms of thematic unity and development... the novel succeeds tremendously well” (112). Although it was imperfect, the third book of the tetralogy

was a success. The book mostly deals with the love triangle between Arthur, Guenever, and Lancelot, and the struggle for each of them to maintain his or her goodness. Guenever and Lancelot betray Arthur by having an affair which eventually plays a large role in the destruction of the entire kingdom.

While the psychology and emotions of these three characters are the main focus of this novel, however, White still discusses the prevention of war. *The Ill-Made Knight* is the book in which everything that Arthur has created starts to unravel; the Round Table falls apart due to competition and jealousy, and the Quest for the Holy Grail turns out to be a disaster because all the “good” knights in the kingdom end up dying, leaving the bad ones behind to create problems at court. His knights become more and more superficial, materialistic, and violent. Despite Arthur’s best efforts to stem the tide of Might, it continues to break out because of the human tendency toward violence; Crane writes, “his efforts, like those of many modern powers, to bring peace to the world are drenching it in a bloodbath from which it might not survive” (109). *The Ill-Made Knight* matches the context in which it was written; as Arthur is struggling, and failing, to prevent war in his own Britain, White was watching world leaders struggle and fail to prevent it in 1939 England. By 1939, the war was very present on the home front and difficult to avoid; White refers to David as being “surrounded by refugees and rumours of war” (Garnett 42). In a diary entry of April 1939, he writes, “Conscription is now seriously spoken of in England, and everybody lives from one speech of Hitler’s to the next” (Warner 121). In this entry, the tension and fear in England during this time is palpable; no one knew what Hitler’s next move would be, and whether it would throw the world into chaos. In one letter, White writes to Garnett, because of the war, “Sometimes I think... everybody... is gradually going insane” (Garnett 42). Even as

early as 1939, the war was already having an impact on British civilians, including White, which is evident in *The Ill-Made Knight* in Arthur's attempts to stop war from breaking out.

It is important to note that while some people, like White, became strong pacifists and wanted to avoid war at all costs, others believed that war was necessary to stop Hitler, because everything else was failing. The League of Nations failed "to deter the authoritarian governments from acts of aggression or effectively to punish them for their misdemeanours" (Mackay 26). Attempts to keep the peace, such as Chamberlain's use of the appeasement policy toward Hitler, were futile in preventing massive violence. Mackay writes, "by 1939 there was some evidence that pacifism had passed its peak... In a time of forceful *realpolitik* it was increasingly difficult to rebut the realist contention that force, or at least the threat of force, was the only language the dictators understood" (26). In other words, the people generally understood that authoritarian leaders believed in the idea of "Might equals Right." They understood that war, although awful, had to happen, because Hitler and other dictators would not listen to reason – just as the young King Arthur decides to do battle with the lords in his kingdom who are challenging his rule. They will not listen to anything but force. In general, the attitude of the British people in the 1930s towards the prospect of war "was not so much fearful as resigned" (Makay 41). They did not really want war, but they accepted it and endured it. Furthermore, by September 1940 "there was a general feeling that the Germans would crack up within the next year" (Warner 169). No one foresaw the war lasting much longer anyway, and England was going to be involved in the war whether it wanted to or not, so people just figured that it would be best to use force and put a quick end to the conflict.

In this context, White's criticisms of both war and the governments partaking in it could seem ignorant and insensitive. As Warner points out, White "omitted to notice that man is so far

averse to warring on his kind that war-propaganda has to insinuate that the people to be attacked are in some way non-human..." (182). While *The Ill-Made Knight* implies that people love fighting each other just to fight and to be competitive, the reality, which White ignores, is that most ordinary people need to be strongly manipulated by dehumanizing propaganda before they are willing to fight other human beings. The average British citizen did not want war much more than White did. As a result, sometimes his books could be perceived as ignorant or out of touch with reality.

Even worse, as White wrote *The Ill-Made Knight*, he was living in the comfort and safety of Ireland while everyone in England was suffering and taking one day at a time, just trying to stay alive. In a letter to L.J. Potts, he wrote, "I am simply taking no notice of all your war business across the sea" (Gallix, *Letters to a Friend* 109). The phrase "war business" is flippant, making it sound like the people in Britain are involved in the war as a matter of personal choice. A few paragraphs later, he asks, "...how are you all enjoying the war?" (111). White seemed to think that those, unlike him, who had chosen to remain in Britain during the war *wanted* war. Everything was black-and-white to him; if someone was not actively dodging the war or advocating peace, that person must have supported fighting. He did not seem to understand that people were only fighting because it was necessary to retain their freedom.

The Ill-Made Knight picks up a few years after *The Queen of Air and Darkness* ends; Arthur's Round Table is firmly established and well-known, and a young French boy named Lancelot is training fiercely, dreaming of becoming one of Arthur's knights. He "had been thinking of King Arthur with all his might. He was in love with him" (White, *The Once and Future King* 311). Lancelot is obsessed with Arthur and the idea of working with "a band of knights who believe in justice rather than strength" (312). Arthur has managed to make the

Round Table “fashionable;” people know about it, even in France, and want to be a part of it. His plan to end conflict in his kingdom has worked beautifully for a while. As a result of the work of the knights of the Round Table, the country is much more peaceful; White writes, “now any virgin could circumambulate the whole country, even with gold and ornaments upon her person, without the least fear of harm... now there were proper hospitals, governed by religious orders of knighthood... All the tyrannous giants were dead, all the dangerous dragons... had been put out of action” (426). The knights have made the kingdom much more secure and less violent.

Soon, however, things start to go awry. Arthur confesses to Lancelot, “...it has turned into sportsmanship... All these knights now are making a fetish of it. They are turning it into a competitive thing” (362). Instead of focusing on doing good, the knights have become obsessed with gaining honor and being the best knight of the Table. They are missing the point, and have become mired in friction and jealousy. When Gawain and his brothers start murdering honorable men in cold blood, Arthur realizes that his solution is “all wrong” (431). He says, “It was a mistake because the Table itself was founded on force. Right must be established by right” (432). Now that the kingdom has been made secure, the fighters “have run out of things to fight for... there is nothing for them to use their might on” (435). Arthur realizes that he needs to come up with a new solution.

Arthur’s next attempt at keeping peace in his kingdom is to send his men on a religious quest; his theory is that if the knights work in the service of God, a favorable outcome must follow. He says, “If our Might was given a channel so that it worked for God, instead of for the rights of man, surely that would stop the rot” (437). So Arthur sends his knights on a crusade to find the Holy Grail (437). However, the quest ends up being just as empty as the Round Table; Arthur has still used Might, even if it is for God. Everyone comes home either angry or

wounded; the knights are described as “in a temper,” “worn and confused,” “tired men” who are “limping on crutches” (439, 447). People are jealous of and annoyed with young Galahad for being too pure and invincible, and disillusioned with morality in general because it seems unattainable. Lionel even calls morality “a form of insanity” (446). The quest for the Grail has only caused even more frustration and tension among Arthur’s knights. White writes, “If you achieve perfection, you die. There had been nothing left for Galahad to ask of God, except death. The best knights had gone to perfection, leaving the worst to hold their sieges” (482). Now that the best knights are dead and gone, the court has become a festering, toxic atmosphere, full of superficiality. *The Ill-Made Knight* ends with everyone in the court bored, waiting for scandal to rise to the surface.

The Candle in the Wind and The Once and Future King

Finally, in *The Candle in the Wind*, the fourth segment of *The Once and Future King*, Arthur makes one final attempt to keep the peace. Instead of trying to channel Might, he realizes that he needs to abolish it altogether in favor of “right as a criterion of its own... justice as an abstract thing which... [does] not lean upon power” (486). He establishes a code of Civil Law. As king, Arthur must be entirely impartial in executing justice, because, as he points out, “if I don’t stand for law, I won’t have law among my people” (555). Aware of this, he tells Lancelot and Guenever to be careful. He warns them, “I have to be absolutely just... a real king must be willing to execute his friends” (555). Despite this warning, however, they are not careful enough. Mordred and Agravaire lead a group of armed soldiers to the Queen’s chamber, where they find Lancelot. Although he escapes, the Queen is put on trial and this sets into motion a chain of events which culminate in war. The book ends with Arthur alone and miserable in his tent,

preparing for his final battle. Law, Arthur's "final effort against Might," has failed (557). Justice ultimately does not work because of its "impersonality;" the law cannot sense the motives and intentions of people (637). It cannot tell whether a person, such as Lancelot or Guenever, has a good heart, or whether a person is murderously trying to tear apart a peaceful country and usurp the throne, as Mordred does. In this case, the law is used for evil purposes and bloody catastrophe is the result.

At the end of *The Candle in the Wind*, the reader is left with a very dismal view of human nature. It seems that White's message is that war is utterly unavoidable, and that any efforts toward peace are futile. Yet there is one final scene that provides some hope; as Arthur sits miserably in his tent, the night before the battle, a young page named Tom walks in. He is eager to fight the next day, but Arthur asks him not to. The old king tells Tom the story of his life, because he "wanted there to be somebody left, who would remember their famous idea... he wanted him to tell everybody who would listen" (644). Tom is "a kind of vessel to carry on the idea, when things go wrong... the whole hope depends on him" (645). In order for future generations to have hope of preventing war, Tom must remain alive. Of course, "Tom" is Sir Thomas Malory. Arthur's famous idea of the knights of the Round Table is a metaphorical "candle," and Tom is the "light-bringer" who must "shield it from the wind" and pass it on to future generations (645). He is Arthur's last hope.

Although this short exchange between Tom and Arthur only takes up four pages out, it is so vital that White named the fourth book *The Candle in the Wind*. He suggests that knowledge may be passed on through literature, writing, "If people could be persuaded to read and write... there was still a chance that they might come to reason" (647). As Merlyn says in *The Sword in the Stone*, "The best thing for being sad... you may see the world about you devastated by evil

lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then – to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it” (176-177). Lupack writes, “The ending of the 1958 *Once and Future King* implies that the best answer to macrocosmic sorrows like war is indeed to learn something – from the examples of books like Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* and White’s own sequence” (112). Knowledge of history and literature is Arthur’s last hope, his true final attempt to solve the problem of might. And White himself wants readers to learn something not only from Malory, but from his own work.

White himself, as the narrator, makes a statement about war and history in *The Candle in the Wind* by directly addressing the reader. He writes, “Do you think that they, with their Battles, Famine, Black Death, and Serfdom, were less enlightened than we are, with our Wars, Blockade, Influenza, and Conscription?” (*The Once and Future King* 544). By addressing the reader directly, White engages him or her, forcing the reader to mentally answer his question. He points out that although modern society considers itself advanced and superior to that of the dark ages, its practices and institutions are not very different from those of medieval history books. Battles and wars are the same, in any age. White makes the reader realize that his or her society has not advanced as much as he or she likes to believe; in the end, human beings are still murdering each other over imaginary lines on the earth.

The Candle in the Wind was published in 1958 as part of *The Once and Future King*, which combined all four segments. Warner writes, “The first four Arthur books were finally published by Collins and then by the Reprint Society in 1958, under the title of *The Once and Future King*” (189). *The Once and Future King* ended up being very successful immediately upon publication; according to Warner, “If he wanted esteem for being a successful writer, the summer of 1958 should have gratified him. *The Once and Future King* had been acclaimed on

both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States it was on the Ten Bestsellers List for three weeks running. The B.B.C. asked him to write a play for them” (284-285). In 1960, White excitedly wrote to Garnett, “I may be following your footsteps to America next September... If you read the popular press you will have heard that some people called Lerner & Loewe, who turned B. Shaw’s *Pygmalion* into *My Fair Lady*... are making a ‘musical’ and a film out of my Arthur books. B. Shaw’s estate is said to have earned £250,000 out of *My Fair Lady* and I have exactly the same contract as he had!” (Garnett 289). The film adaptation, *Camelot*, was produced in 1967 by Warner Bros. (Gallix, *T.H. White: An Annotated Bibliography* 43). In 1961, White wrote, “I am being approached by the leading lecture agent in America, who wants to send me on a three month tour” (Garnett 296). According to Gallix, *The Once and Future King* was translated into Dutch, Spanish, Greek, Hungarian, Romanian, German, Hebrew, Danish, and Swedish (*T.H. White: An Annotated Bibliography* 41-42). There is no doubt that *The Once and Future King* was widely successful, both in England and in the U.S.

The musical which White refers to in his letter to Garnett is *Camelot*. It was first performed in 1960, and was hugely successful. According to Piereson, “*Camelot* made its debut on Broadway... with a star-studded cast featuring Julie Andrews as Guinevere, Richard Burton as Arthur, Robert Goulet as Lancelot, and Roddy McDowall as Mordred” (190). It was a massive financial success; as a 1960 review by Orville Prescott reads, “It is given to few authors to write an undoubted masterpiece and to fewer still to find their masterpiece recognized within their lifetime and rewarded by a shower of gold. Yet this is the happy lot of T.H. White... ‘*Camelot*’ is one of the greatest financial smashes of modern show business” (28). Clearly, the play was a hit. In fact, it was so popular that it reportedly reached the attention of the president of the United States. As Jacqueline Kennedy told journalist Theodore H. White less than a week after her

husband's death, John F. Kennedy enjoyed the play *Camelot*, and had a "fondness for the title tune... In the evening, she said, the couple often enjoyed listening to a recording of the song before going to bed" (Piereson 188). Jackie Kennedy used the play inspired by White's work in order to shape her late husband's legacy.

The success of *The Once and Future King* is also very evident in reviews from the time period. One 1958 review titled "Arthurian Achievement," which appears in the *Times Literary Supplement*, reads: "Mr. White is much more than a spinner of good plots; his prose gives as much pleasure as his matter. There are witty and learned asides on every subject under the sun... astonishing technical skill..." (224). The anonymous author of this review also praises the way in which White makes his characters three-dimensional and interesting, despite their goodness, writing, "Moralists have noted with regret that wickedness is in general more interesting than virtue. It is the author's achievement to have drawn good men, Lancelot, Arthur, and the misguided Gawaine, and to have made their goodness as exciting as any evil" ("Arthurian Achievement" 224). A 1959 review by Siriol Hugh-Jones reads: "the strands in the book are so beautifully woven together and the complete pattern so gradually and delicately revealed... The whole thing has high purpose and heroic scale... You do not read *The Once and Future King* purely for entertainment. Either you leave it alone after the first chapter, or it has you by the throat" (ix). Hugh-Jones also refers to *The Once and Future King* as White's "most important work" (ix). A third review by Ben Ray Redman of *The New York Times* says, "The whole that we now have is a far more impressive work of literature, a far more remarkable flight of imagination, than readers of the earlier versions... could have guessed it would finally be" (Redman 4). The book was well-liked as soon as it was published, and readers appreciated White's imagination and his talent for fiction writing.

Interestingly, while reviews generally praise the book, they do not say very much about its anti-war theme, despite the fact that White himself proclaimed this theme to be the main purpose of the book. Hugh-Jones, for example, only devotes a single paragraph of his entire two-page-long review to the anti-war theme. It is virtually impossible that readers could not have noticed how much the book dwells upon war; its ending focuses on Arthur contemplating his failure to maintain peace in his kingdom, before telling young Tom that spreading the story to future generations is absolutely vital in the preservation of humanity. It is possible that readers ignored White's heavy anti-war message because they were reading *The Once and Future King* relatively soon after the second World War and during the Cold War, when such messages could have been perceived as insulting or out-of-touch with reality. Perhaps they simply read the story for its beautiful re-telling of the Arthurian legend, or for its "cathartic" depiction of "Arthur's tragedy and triumph" and of "adult, fallible, average sinful people who are trying to do good rather than evil" (Hugh-Jones ix). The characters in the book are very human, and White's commentary on both them and the events of their lives is compelling. Or perhaps readers enjoyed the book for its magic and fantasy in a time of tough, cold reality. One review of the era, titled "Return from Avilion," echoes this sentiment. The anonymous author writes, "The steady growth of Mr. White's popularity is a strange feature of our disillusioned post-war world. An easy explanation is that people are tired of psychological and social realism and yearn for pageantry, magic and ritual..." ("Return from Avilion" 755). Tired, war-weary people needed an escape, and White's book provided the perfect antidote in some ways. Yet it cannot be denied that the book also deals with extremely heavy subject matter, including war; after all, as Hugh-Jones writes, "You do not read *The Once and Future King* purely for entertainment." To ignore the theme of war is to ignore the most important part of the book, and White's entire purpose in

writing *The Once and Future King*. It is quite strange that readers did not have stronger feelings toward the anti-war messages present in the book. It does not make sense that they could have been able to skip right past those messages, considering the enormous role that war had played and was continuing to play in their lives.

The Book of Merlyn

White's fifth installment to *The Once and Future King*, called *The Book of Merlyn* (1977), adds to the cynical view of human nature evident in the other four books. According to Warner, White wrote it "believing that it would influence the way people thought about war and induce them to make a new and more sensible kind of peace" (189). It is an important book because, as Brewer points out, "*The Book of Merlyn* might seem to represent White's last word on the subject of Arthur, since it was not published until so long after the rest" (150-151). However, to many literary critics, it was, and still is, viewed as overly cynical and misanthropic. Lupack, for example, succinctly describes it as "pessimistic philosophizing" (108). The entire book is filled with cynical tirades about man and his selfishness and pride, and impractical theories about how to fix man's problems and stop war. Warner also took issue with *The Book of Merlyn*. She is brutally honest, writing, "It is difficult to read the fifth Arthur without exasperation. It could have been so good and it is so bad" (182). The book has clear messages that are important and have merit, but the writing is not good. There is no subtlety in the deliverance of the messages; it is way too obvious that Merlyn is not his own character, but rather White's voice, a device to present his own opinions.

The story takes place the night before the final battle with Mordred. An elderly, weary Arthur sits in his tent, miserably contemplating his entire life and the decisions that have led up to

this turn of events. He knows that war is inevitable, and that he is going to die. He has just begun to cry, and is so utterly demoralized that when a newcomer enters the tent, Arthur “turned his head away... incurious as to his identity” (White, *The Book of Merlyn* 1). He is thoroughly depressed, and has no interest in anyone or anything. The newcomer turns out to be Merlyn, who, in a gesture of comfort, “took the worn hand... holding it quietly with a thumb on its blue veins, waiting for life to revive” (1). The two begin to talk, and Arthur tells Merlyn, “Everything which you helped to do was wrong. All your teaching was deception. Nothing was worth doing” (4). He has completely given up, and is disillusioned with noble ideas such as the Round Table or justice. He has endured immense suffering and betrayal. Everything he has ever done as king has proven futile, and he is powerless to stop the destruction of humanity.

However, Merlyn is not quite as ready to give up. He gently insists upon “one more try” (5). Although the two men both agree that “people are dupes, and wicked too,” Merlyn points out that “wicked they may be, but not utterly” (6). People have at least some good in them. This spark of virtue, although it may be tiny, makes it worth trying to save humanity from ultimate destruction. So, Merlyn magically whisks Arthur off to the badger’s sett, and they are greeted by all the animals from the Wart’s childhood. Merlyn tells Arthur that there are some gaps in his education; he has never seen “the Ant and the Wild Goose” (43). Of course, in *The Sword in the Stone*, the Wart does meet these creatures, but before White discarded *The Book of Merlyn*, he originally had intended to revise *The Sword in the Stone* to fit with *The Book of Merlyn* (Gallix, *T.H. White: An Annotated Bibliography* 46). As a result, these two chapters appear in both *The Sword in the Stone* and *The Book of Merlyn*.

When the magician and his pupil arrive at the sett, Merlyn and the animals get into a long-winded, anachronistic discussion about political and economic systems while Arthur

silently watches in puzzlement. They talk about how ants are communists or fascists, geese are anarchists, bees are socialists, and men are the only species who have capitalism (White, *The Book of Merlyn* 26). Merlyn, who has lived backwards since the twentieth century, is in favor of capitalism and mentions how the “Russians of my youth should have modified their ideas” (28). This is a clear reference to bolshevism, and one of many explicit references to government systems throughout the book. Later on, after Arthur has visited the ants and is horrified by their monotonous, pointless lives of “perpetual motion” without a purpose, he compares the ants to human beings. Merlyn replies, “There is nothing surprising in that. The ants adopted the line of politics which man is flirting with at present, in the infinite past... They are the perfect communist state” (64). White intentionally paints a very negative, horrifying picture of communism. He then points out that fascism and communism are “the same” in perfection (64). White’s political agenda is very clear; it is obvious that he has been influenced by the twentieth-century government systems that have surrounded him, and wants to illustrate just how awful they can be.

Obviously, the animals and Arthur have no clue what Merlyn is talking about, as they are medieval characters. Arthur innocently asks, “Have I been stupid... not to notice animals?” (28). Merlyn then cries, ““Stupid!... There at last is a crumb of truth on a pair of human lips”” (28-29). He takes Arthur’s humble question and launches into a cruel two-page-long lecture about the hubris of the human race, which, when read through the lens of Merlyn being White’s own voice, is very cynical. Merlyn calls man “an upstart... dubbing himself *Homo sapiens*... proclaiming to be the lord of creation, like that ass Napoleon putting on his own crown... the amazing, ineffable presumption” (29). He continues, “Man, proud man, stands there in the twentieth century, complacently believing that the race has ‘advanced’ ... and busy blowing his

brothers to bits” (30). Finally, he concludes by calling man “the little atrocity... the odious creature” (30). White’s point, that man has become way too proud and convinced of his own superiority, is clear – and has merit. However, his tirade devolves from a criticism on man’s hubris to a vicious attack on man himself. It is very harsh. It comes across as incredibly misanthropic and pessimistic – and this is only the third chapter of the book.

This cynicism continues throughout the book. In chapter four, Merlyn goes into another diatribe, condemning man as *Homo ferox*, the only species who is dreaded by all other animals, who is obsessed with killing (33-35). When the animals decide against *ferox*, it is because *stultus*, or stupid and inefficient, is better (37). Then they change it to *impoliticus*, meaning man is imprudent, habitually fighting and arguing rather than “waiting for the truth in his head” (38). These terms are all insults, and after listening for a while, Arthur “said grimly: ‘Well, I am sorry. I suppose I had better go away and drown myself. I am cheeky, insignificant, ferocious, stupid and impolitic. It hardly seems worth our going on’” (39). Just as Merlyn seems to be the voice for White’s opinion, Arthur seems to state what the reader is probably thinking; this is a depressing view of humanity.

Soon, Merlyn sends Arthur to visit the ants and the geese. When he comes back, he, Merlyn, and the animals have another discussion about war and humanity. They come to the conclusion that war is caused by two things: national, or public, property, and a biological “glandular deficiency” which drives man toward conflict (120). This part of the human physiology, according to Merlyn, causes man to seize “upon the first handy excuse” for war (120). Of course, this is all part of a fictional hypothesis made by Merlyn and some talking animals, so it should be taken at face value. Yet the point, which is that there is something in human beings which makes them prone to conflict, seems valid. Before World War I, Europe

had been at peace for a relatively long amount of time, and people were itching to go to war. Nationalist and imperialist sentiments were running high; people wanted more land for their own nations. Propaganda glamorized battle, making it look glorious. The assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was simply the catalyst, the “first handy excuse,” for the world to explode into chaos. Merlyn says, “It is nationalism, the claims of small communities to parts of the indifferent earth as communal property, which is the curse of man” (100). The creation of “imaginary lines on the earth” gives humans something to fight about when they want to fight. Merlyn’s reasoning is that man is “conscious of himself as a separate being... so that any form of pronounced collectivism in politics is contrary to the specialization of man” (116). Because men are inherently selfish and think of themselves as individuals, any type of communist or collectivist state does not work. It is incompatible with the nature of man, who will naturally fight for the right to have his own private property.

Although this tendency causes war, however, it is also part of what redeems human beings. It allows them to, as Arthur points out, search for and recognize “The Truth” (112). This ability is something that belongs only to individual people, not to any State. Only individuals have “that strange, altruistic, rare and obstinate decency which will make writers or scientists maintain their truths at the risk of death” (112). This human quality is why Merlyn insists that “the Individual is more important than the State” (116). He or she has the ability to find truth and work for, or even die for, a good cause.

Merlyn’s solution to the incompatibility between man’s nature and the creation of public property and land is quite radical. He wants to “abolish nations, and not only nations but states also; indeed, you must tolerate no unit larger than the family” (101). Merlyn continues, “I am an anarchist, like any other sensible person... the geese are anarchists... they realise that the moral

sense must come from inside, not from outside” (124). Of course, the complete abolition of the State is highly impractical and would never work, because world leaders, the people with real power, would never agree to it. But Merlyn’s point makes some sense, that “the future lies with the personal soul” (117). It is up to individual thinkers and truth-seekers to work to prevent war. This idea is consistent with the ending of *The Once and Future King*; by having Arthur tell the page Tom to write down his story, White is advocating the use of knowledge found in literature as a means of preventing further conflict. Just as Arthur hopes that people will read Tom’s story and think through it, and Merlyn sees hope in the power of humans to search for truth and knowledge, White hopes that reading his book will help people think through his ideas about war and prevent it in the future.

Yet despite the somewhat more hopeful tone of this potential solution to war, White ends *The Book of Merlyn* on an even more dismal note. Arthur goes back to the real world with some hope in humanity, ready to try to stop the impending battle and “do his duty as well as he could” (129). He calls a truce with Mordred, and while the two parties are agreeing upon it, it is “explained to the waiting ranks that none of them must make a hostile demonstration, but all must keep their swords in sheath” (129). Everything is proceeding as planned, and the treaty is “agreed upon, to the surprise of all... For a moment joy and peace were in the balance” (130). Yet just as everything seems to be falling into place, just as the reader starts to believe that maybe there is some hope of finding peace, White destroys it. He writes:

At that knife-edge of a moment, the old Adam reared itself in a different form... man was a slayer by instinct. A grass snake moved in the meadow near their feet, close to an officer of Mordred’s staff. This officer stepped back instinctively... the bright sword

flamed into being, to destroy the so-called viper. The waiting armies, taking it for treachery, raised their shout of rage... so the tumult rose, the war-yell sounded. (130-131)

Mordred had been prepared to accept the truce with Arthur, and the snake is the only reason the attempt at peace does not work. It is a random twist of fate, a final bit of cynicism to crush any last strands of hope; human beings can work very hard to create peace, but something terrible and unpredictable will always happen that will incite men to destroy it.

Interestingly, the tone in White's version of this little scene is very different from the tone in Malory's version. Malory writes: "Just then an adder came out of a little heath-bush and stung a knight on the foot... at once he drew his sword to slay the adder... but when the hosts on both sides saw that sword drawn... [they] rushed toward each other" (736). This may be read as a subtle Biblical allusion; since one of the very first stories in the Book of Genesis, when Satan appears in the form of a serpent to tempt Eve and cause the downfall of man, snakes have been a very common symbol of evil in literature. They are a sly form of evil, which subtly seeps into the world and creates deception and chaos, an evil that is outside human control. This is exactly how this scene works – through the trope of a snake in the garden. It is pure, inhuman evil shattering a fragile illusion of peace. Yet while Malory portrays the snake as the attacker by having it bite a knight on the foot, White's depiction of the same incident is very biased against man. He portrays man as the villain, using violent, jarring words like "reared," "slayer," "flamed," "destroy," "shout," and "rage" to describe the human beings in the scene. They are terrible killers, simply "waiting" for an excuse to tear each other to shreds, like beasts. By contrast, White uses peaceful, innocent words to describe the snake and its surroundings, such as "grass-snake," "meadow," and "so-called viper." He also omits the detail of the snake biting the knight on the foot. The snake is guiltless to White, a simple animal going about its business, slithering

through the grass and not hurting anyone, while the men are the ones who ruthlessly, instinctively destroy the peace. It is evident through White's tone that he has very little faith in the ability of man to resist war. White's tragic final word, his final message on war, is that it is inevitable. Man will always find some reason to fight.

The Book of Merlyn is easily the most vehemently anti-war, anti-humanity text out of all five segments of *The Once and Future King*. It is so negative about man and his tendency toward war that some people perceived it as offensive and insulting, especially since White was writing it from the safety of Ireland while his countrymen fought to defend England's freedom. In 1942, after reading the manuscript of *The Book of Merlyn*, Garnett wrote bluntly:

...you are out of touch as the result of living in a neutral country. A good deal of the book which will seem obviously true in 1955 seems to us in London today to be superficial, or irritating. The condemnation of man as stultus, impoliticus ferox etc makes us cross. We think so vividly & so continually of our chaps on rafts, washed about for a week, or a month; of the men digging out the living plaster covered mummies from bombed houses, of aircraft crews beating out fires with their bare hands. And we do not feel man to be what you describe... you are a dozen years removed from our spirit. (107)

Garnett's mention of "stultus, impoliticus ferox" refers to White's proposing of these terms in *The Book of Merlyn* as ways to describe man. Garnett took offense to these nicknames; when used to describe the men who were suffering and dying to keep England from being conquered by Hitler, they seemed incredibly insulting and disrespectful. In the letter, Garnett concedes that in about "a dozen years" White's comments will make sense and even seem valid. Right now, however, is not the time to disparage the sacrifices being made by those suffering both on the battlefield and on the home front in England.

Similarly, Collins, White's publisher in England, wrote: "Such subjects should really be written about some time afterwards so that they could be seen in perspective" (Garnett 107). Collins also complained that after altering the beginning of the book and adding the final chapters, White had "changed into a political moralist. Fun and fancy have abdicated in favour of a purpose" (Warner 188). White was simply not in touch with reality, and this lack of empathy became an issue for his book to an extent, changing it from a lighthearted tale about King Arthur to a 'treatise on war.' Those, like White, who staunchly advocate pacifism in the midst of a raging war can come across as annoying, preachy, or even cruel, to those doing the actual fighting.

The Book of Merlyn was published posthumously in 1977, although White had originally intended for the book to be published as part of *The Once and Future King*. Collins, his publisher in England, refused to publish it with the rest of the books because White "had re-written the entire first three chapters, which had already been published, in order to "'fit in with... [his] changed outlook,'" changing "'the whole idea of the epic'" in order to "bring them into conformity with 'The Book of Merlyn'" (Warner 188). Furthermore, as Collins argued, White "had written... [*The Book of Merlyn*] as the clinching last section of a very long work, and this was too long to be produced under wartime conditions" (Warner 189-190). It was simply not feasible to re-print everything in the first three books that had already been published; it would have been wasteful and very difficult to justify.

Yet White did not seem to understand this. Garnett points out that many passages in their correspondence "show Tim to have been incapable of understanding the difficulties of English publishers in war-time" (Garnett 75). His lack of understanding about the war caused major problems with his publisher over the paper shortage. He complained about "the quenchless fear

of war, which... robs profits in the bookselling world even when it hasn't broken out" (Warner 127-128). In fact, when editing his book of letters with White, Garnett had to "omit libellous material for which I and my publisher might suffer ...practically all our letters about his difficulties with a publisher are left out" (Garnett 8). White evidently was not very respectful of his publisher or understanding of the situation. He could not understand that devoting valuable resources to the war effort might have been more important than his very long book; the success from *The Sword in the Stone* had gone to his head, and he could not accept that publishing a 667-page book was just not possible. Garnett wrote to White, "you are... out of touch with our economy. There are 2 practical points which face every publisher today... (1) There is practically no paper for books. (2) A publisher can sell all the books he publishes provided the price is low, i.e. if the books are short..." (107). *The Once and Future King* is far from short, and Collins simply could not afford to publish it. The disagreement turned into "months of negotiations, interventions, recriminations, invocations of contract, blackmail bargaining... threatenings of legal action" (Warner 189). Eventually, White's relationship with Collins had deteriorated so much that White switched to a new publisher in England, Jonathan Cape, for his later works (189).

Most reviews of the time are quite unfavorable and take issue with the conspicuousness of the book's agenda. Benny Green wrote in 1978 that the "allegorical overtones" in the fifth book "become obtrusive to the point where, artistically speaking, their effect is disastrous... it was perhaps just as well that something as mundane as a paper shortage should have saved him from his own verbosity" (23). An anonymous 1978 review in *The Wilson Quarterly* reads: "[The] talk about fascism, communism, and capitalism is dreary" (164). In a 1977 review in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Martha Spaulding writes, "It is easy to see why *The Book of Merlyn* was

eventually left aside. White had abandoned artistic distance to write what amounts to a political treatise, with Merlyn's role little more than that of mouthpiece" (96). Each of these reviews reveal the obnoxious degree of philosophizing in the book; White sacrificed good writing for his political agenda, and the result is frustrating and tiresome.

Yet each of these reviews also praises the book to an extent. Green calls the book "genius," and writes, "it at least provides a fascinating insight into the mind of a most unusual creative writer whose abstruse knowledge gives to his view of the modern world a curious obliquity" (23). The review in *The Wilson Quarterly* reads: "...when... [Arthur] becomes a wild goose migrating in freedom... that old White magic again casts its spell" (164). Spaulding writes, "the book has considerable charm and sentiment... White's admirers will find much to recommend it" (96). These reviews suggest that, at least to some degree, readers were able to move past problems with the book and still enjoy its charm and its insights. Readers could appreciate *The Book of Merlyn* for the same aspects that made the previous four books likeable; the magic, the animals, and White's creativity all made the book worth reading.

Conclusion

White's *The Once and Future King* was, and is, hugely successful in some ways. It is a very widely read book; many people, both in England and in the United States, read it immediately when it was published and still enjoy it today. It was translated into multiple languages, made into both a film and a hugely successful Broadway production, and received many highly favorable reviews. It became very famous, and made White himself very famous – and quite rich. In terms of financial and literary success, it cannot be contested that the book did extremely well, especially when considered within its historical context; it was an overtly pacifist

book, and still managed to do well despite the fact that it was published in the midst of the second World War.

Yet in terms of accomplishing White's own personal goals in writing the book, *The Once and Future King* seems to have fallen short. White wrote the book with the clearly stated intention of finding an antidote to war and preventing further conflict, but he did not seem to find this solution in the process of writing the book. The tetralogy has, as Warner complains, a "crowded inconclusive conclusion" (190). The book presents several competing arguments about the possibility of finding peace. First, White suggests that peace is impossible through Arthur's multiple failed attempts at ending the fighting, and through the dissolution of his formerly united court into conflicting factions, chaos, and battle. *The Once and Future King* is a book full of failed experiments; Arthur has tried everything he can think of, and nothing has worked. Then, however, White gives the reader a spark of hope when Arthur tells the page Tom to write down the story and spread it to future generations. Maybe the key to future wars is literature and history; maybe if we read about the mistakes of others, we are not doomed to repeat them in our own era.

But then White tears this hope right back down in *The Book of Merlyn*. When the snake randomly appears in the grass during the signing of the treaty, a guard automatically whips out his sword. The kingdom falls apart because of both the random unpredictability of events outside humanity's control, and man's instinctive, uncontrollable drive to be violent; no matter how diplomatic we are, no matter how much effort we make toward peace, our baser instincts toward fighting will always overcome everything else. *The Book of Merlyn* also argues, while Arthur is visiting the animals, that man's tendency toward warfare stems from both a biological part of his brain, and the fact that he owns land. Obviously, human beings cannot change their biological

makeup, and it is not very feasible to eradicate the ownership of territory, so both of these explanations about war add to the pessimism in the fifth book. Already, White has made multiple conflicting suggestions about the possibility of peace. The effect of the tetralogy plus *The Book of Merlyn* is that White's central question in the books, about whether there is a solution to war, feels unanswered. In the end, the reader has so many conflicting pieces of information, so many different explanations for war, so many possible solutions, so many negative explanations of why these solutions will not work, that he does not know what to do with any of it.

But there is yet another possible interpretation of White's work, in addition to the multiple conflicting suggestions that White spells out in the books themselves. Despite the disheartening final message about the inevitability of violence which appears in *The Book of Merlyn*, it is telling that White even bothered to write his Arthurian story at all. If he truly had believed that preventing war was completely and utterly impossible, he would not have written *The Once and Future King* or *The Book of Merlyn*. He would not have taken the time, or invested the emotion, or been so concerned with getting the whole of it published, if he did not believe that it could have an effect on the world. As Warner points out, the book "was intended for survivors...who... had allowed themselves to be bossed into war by their governments. Such survivors must learn to think for themselves, and form some sort of International Front against warmakers" (100-101). The very fact that White wrote the book reveals that he did have hope that humanity could change, and could find a way to secure a lasting peace. To White, man is not completely past saving, and his book itself is the antidote to war that he was looking for. Its miserable, hopeless ending may be interpreted as a warning. Although the book itself does not provide a clear solution to war, White hoped that by reading the book, people would realize that they needed to check their violent, greedy tendencies toward grabbing land, or else risk facing

the same miserable fate as Arthur and his kingdom of Camelot. He wanted readers to understand that they have lessons available to them about war, ideology, and human nature, from both literature and history, and that it is up to them to pay attention to them and apply them to real-world problems. The mistakes have already been made, and readers need to learn from them.

White also hoped that readers would take the ‘inconclusive conclusion’ of his book and continue exploring the problem, looking for feasible solutions. Although he published the book without finding an answer to the problem of war, maybe his readers would succeed. La Jeunesse writes, “Authors rarely conclude a novel this way; they don’t generally admit defeat. Instead, they force their stories to communicate their message. But in the scientific world, it isn’t unheard of for an experiment to fail, for the scientist to die before results are achieved, and for another person to pick up the work where his predecessor left it” (34). As Merlyn says, the Table was not a failure, but an “experiment. Experiments lead to new ones” (White, *The Book of Merlyn* 11). White hoped his readers would continue experimenting as Arthur did; in fact, as La Jeunesse points out, he concludes *The Book of Merlyn* with the statement, ““Here ends the book of the One time King... Here also begins – if perchance a man may in future time survive the pestilence and continue the task he has begun – the hope of the Future King”” (35). White wanted people to survive and continue searching for a solution to war. In *The Book of Merlyn*, Merlyn says, “Nobody can be saved from anything, unless they save themselves... the only thing worth doing for the race is to increase its stock of ideas... By this process the means of improvement is offered, to be accepted or rejected freely, and there is a faint hope of progress in the course of the millennia (White 11). Increasing the stock of ideas of the human race is exactly what White tried to do in writing *The Once and Future King*. He saw and experienced destruction and violence, and knew that he was powerless to stop it in the moment. It was far too late to do anything about

World War II; it had to run its course. Yet he believed that by writing his book, he was offering up new ideas to the human race, and hopefully they would take them and use them to improve themselves and avoid further destruction.

However, although White idealistically hoped that his book would greatly influence readers and help prevent further bloodshed, the reality is that many readers seemed to ignore its anti-war message. Reviews from the time period in which it was published tend to focus on the quality of the writing, the magical elements, the charm and humor, or the psychological and emotional struggles of the central characters, entirely bypassing the messages about politics and war. When reviews do mention these messages, it is either in passing, or to criticize them for being superfluous and overly preachy. It seems that readers often missed White's entire point in writing his books.

One possible explanation for the lack of focus on the anti-war theme is that the extremely pessimistic conclusions about war and humanity are simply too depressing and cynical for readers to stomach. The pessimism turns readers away from the parts of the book that deal with these themes, rather than actually helping them understand the lessons that White wants them to. Another possibility is that the inconclusiveness of the conclusion makes it impossible for readers to discern White's actual solution about war; there are so many conflicting messages that it is easier for a reader to ignore the theme of war entirely. As La Jeunesse points out, "Reading White under the impression that he sends a mixed message, critics tend [to] see it as the first appearance of children in Arthurian literature and classify it as children's literature. It is perhaps for this reason that *The Once and Future King* has not received much criticism as an anti-war novel" (21-22). The ambiguity and confusion in White's conclusion appears to be quite

problematic; not only does it prevent readers from finding a solid solution to war, but it also turns them away from the theme entirely.

Whatever the reason for readers' lack of attention toward White's pacifist message, however, the result is the same. When examined in the light of White's own hopes for *The Once and Future King*, it cannot be said that the book has been successful. Readers either ignored his messages about war, or criticized them. White wanted the book to help readers prevent war, yet, at least as of right now, in 2017, the world is engulfed in various conflicts. People die every day in multiple wars, all across the globe, and no one is any closer to establishing peace. Yet it cannot be debated that White's book was, and is, immensely popular, so maybe in the future it will begin to have the impact that White always hoped it would.

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