
UNIT 4 “MORTE D’ARTHUR”:THEMES AND SYMBOLS

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4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

After studying this concluding Unit on “Morte d’Arthur”, you will be able to discuss:

- The themes of the poem and their relevance to the Victorian Age
- The significance of the symbols and allusions in the poem
- The two central characters, King Arthur and Sir Bedivere.

The aim is to critically understand and appreciate the poem by interweaving the themes, symbols and characters with the story and show how the early Arthurian period is **transposed** to the Victorian period when Tennyson wrote the poem. You will have to read this Unit alongside the poem that is given in the previous Unit (Unit 3).

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Tennyson’s poem “Morte d’Arthur” is the eleventh book in his **magnum opus** *The Idylls of the King*, an epic narrative in twelve books. Though this is the eleventh book, this can also be read as a stand-alone poem without linking it to the rest of the epic. This is because the poem is remarkable for its presentation of King Arthur and his final dialogue with his last loyal knight Sir Bedivere. The poem marks both an end and a beginning for Tennyson - it is a poem that deals with Tennyson’s personal grief over the death of his friend Arthur Hallam and when he included it in the epic *The Idylls of the King*, it seems to signal the beginning of a new creative period in Tennyson’s life. What begins as a lament over the loss of a close friend, ends with an affirmation that life has to go on where the old order changes and gives birth to a new order.

The idea of writing an epic on King Arthur is due to the interest Tennyson and his Cambridge companions had developed towards medieval values which they felt were missing in their times, i.e. the Victorian Age. Tennyson was greatly influenced by **medievalism** and the values it represented. These were values such as valour, loyalty, personal honour, and chivalry. Tennyson decided to write an epic poem based on the Arthurian legend, but this was cut short when Hallam

died, leaving Tennyson in a state of depression. But when he returned to the story of King Arthur (as narrated by Sir Thomas Malory in 1485 in the medieval period), he discovered the significance of King Arthur's last courageous words to his loyal knight, Sir Bedivere. It made him realize the need to courageously march on and not surrender to personal grief such as that caused by his friend's death. This poem thus marks an important section of his epic *The Idylls of the King* as it inducts the medieval values onto his contemporary times.

Tennyson understood that there was no option but to face the universal problem of life that affects every human being - the **impermanence** of life, the undeniable fact of **mortality** summed up in the proverb "here today and gone tomorrow". The courage to face the timeless recurrence of death that hangs over life is possible through recourse to faith in God and spiritual values. The poem presents this theme of facing death by revealing Sir Bedivere's mental agitation over the impending death of his King and his own survival thereafter. The symbols Tennyson uses are those of the Round Table and the sword Excalibur while the themes are those of loyalty to the King and acceptance of death as signaling the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

4.2 THEMES OF THE POEM "MORTE D' ARTHUR"

"Morte d'Arthur" is the most well known poem in *The Idylls of the King*. This poem deals with the death of the legendary British king Arthur, and King Arthur's last command to his loyal knight Sir Bedivere to deposit his sword Excalibur in the lake from where he had first received it. Sir Bedivere hesitates to throw the sword on finding it to be elegant and beautiful and feels it should not be lost in the lake thereby denying future generations the chance to experience its splendour. He also feels that it should be preserved as a reminder of the glory of the King who possessed it. King Arthur's insists and commands for the third time that it should be thrown in the lake, as Sir Bedivere had failed to obey him twice earlier. Sir Bedivere executes his King's command when he discovers that the sword thrown into the lake is grasped by an arm clothed in white that rises from the lake and disappears with it under the water. Arthur requests Sir Bedivere to place him on a barge where three queens attend on Arthur and all of them sail off to the isle of Avilion, leaving Sir Bedivere to accept the truth that the old order is over and has yielded to a new one.

If this poem is read alongside Tennyson's life, we will discover that just as Sir Bedivere finally accepts a new order in the place of the old order of King Arthur, Tennyson reconciles himself to the death of his friend Arthur Hallam and moves on. Christopher Ricks in his biographical study of the poet, wrote that "Morte d'Arthur" endeavours "to imagine and depict a person left alone after Arthur's death as Tennyson was after his *Arthur's*."¹(Tennyson's Arthur is Arthur Hallam).

Hence the theme that is central to the poem is acceptance of human mortality and the acceptance of a new life that displaces the old by a new order- in short acceptance of transition to different phases of life, with courage and equanimity. This is conveyed first by King Arthur who recognizes the passing of a golden era that he had established- the era of the Round Table and loyal Knights, the era of chivalry and ideal governance, the era of glory and success he had personally attained during his kingship. "Morte d'Arthur" is a poem about the passing of not only a great man, but also of a great period in history. An important phase in Tennyson's personal

history had also come to an end. The opening lines of King Arthur that start the dialogue between King Arthur and Sir Bedivere makes clear the theme that an era is about to an end and that this will mark the beginning of a new era.

“The sequel of to-day unsolders all
The goodliest fellowship of famous knights
Whereof this world holds record. Such a sleep
They sleep—the men I loved. I think that we
Shall never more, at any future time,
Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,
Walking about the gardens and the halls
Of Camelot, as in the days that were.
I perish by this people which I made,—
Tho' Merlin sware that I should come again
To rule once more—but let what will be, be.”

These are his first words to Sir Bedivere expressing the end of an era which begins with a summary of the loss of his beloved knights and an acceptance “but let what will be, be”. These six words hint at the change that has come over Tennyson as he strives to overcome his grief over Hallam’s death and starts afresh his poetic career. Hallam’s death takes place at the beginning of Tennyson’s career and the loss of his friend brought with him a tragic sense of a loss of all meaning in life. Twenty years later around 1850, Tennyson wrote *In Memoriam* which begins on a note of sadness similar to Arthur’s opening speech to Sir Bedivere quoted above. But the poem ends on a strong and confident note that Hallam will live on in heaven and Tennyson will join him there. This poem *In Memoriam* ends on a hopeful note that with faith and love, grief can be overcome:

I hold it true, whate'er befall;
I feel it, when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

This poem is a truly Victorian poem that affirms that we can overcome grief by faith and faith alone. “*In Memoriam* reflects the Victorian struggle to reconcile traditional religious faith with the emerging theories of evolution and modern biology. The verses show the development over three years and the poet’s acceptance and understanding of his friend’s death.”² In the later poem *In Memoriam*, we recognize the theme of acceptance of mortality as an unalterable fact of life and the theme of cultivating optimism to look forward to a new life that comes thereafter. Tennyson’s “Morte d’Arthur” ends with a similar message when Sir Bedivere feels **traumatised** at the thought of a future life without his King.

When loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere:
"Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?
Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
For now I see the true old times are dead,

When every morning brought a noble chance,
And every chance brought out a noble knight.
Such times have been not since the light that led
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
Which was an image of the mighty world;
And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken round me, and the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other minds."

King Arthur's reply sums up the basic theme of the poem:

And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge:
"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within Himself make pure! but thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.

Accepting change, accepting a new order of life is a part of our existence. What keeps men strong and courageous in the light of change into an unknown future is faith in God: "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

Faith in God, having an optimistic outlook on what shall come hereafter is a difficult proposition. Tennyson is aware of the Victorian struggle between science and religion, reason and faith, biological theory of evolution and religious theory of Creation, individual aspiration and social responsibility. The underlying hope that with faith in God, one can overcome grief is a classic example of the Victorian attempt to hold on to religion despite the **scepticism** over its **efficacy** engendered by scientific- in particular biological advancement. Tennyson's poetry reflects the uneasiness of the Victorian age, torn between established Christian faith and science and modern progress. But what comes out at the end is a feeling of reassurance and serene acceptance of life and its **oddity**. Tennyson is praised as the first great English poet to be fully aware of the new picture of man's place in the universe revealed by modern science. He wrestles with the new biological theories that disputed the earlier faith in God and religion; this reflection and the assured optimism of the dawn of a new world order were in consonance with Queen Victoria's reign.

Like King Arthur, Queen Victoria is associated with the glory of England, and an age that is celebrated as the great age of industrial advancement, scientific and economic progress, and expansion of the British empire. Her reign of more than sixty-three years was also a period of,

cultural, political, and moral change in Great Britain. She is looked upon as an icon of the strictest standards of morality. Tennyson transposes the medieval story from the Arthurian legend to his times and gives it an **allegorical** significance. The common theme that runs through the medieval legend and the Victorian age is the emphasis on loyalty, obedience, faithfulness and discipline. Faithfulness and loyalty are integral to sustain the moral fibre of society. Disloyalty and **infidelity** bring about the decay and collapse of society. The illicit love between Arthur's wife, Guinevere and his loyal and celebrated Knight Lancelot and the treachery of Mordred result in the dissolution of the society of the knights of the Round Table and the death of Arthur. The chivalry and heroism of the Knights of the Round table get evaporated slowly and the poem "Morte d'Arthur" begins with the wounded King Arthur with his only surviving, loyal knight Sir Bedivere. King Arthur is a symbolic representation of a God-like man who throughout his life led a righteous life and aspired continuously to reach greater perfection both as a King and as a man. Arthur thus stands for aspirations towards the ideal of a higher life. Tennyson seeks to enhance Victorian life symbolized by Queen Victoria towards higher perfection.

The theme of loyalty is the second theme of the poem. As stated above, the poem though set in the medieval period is essentially Victorian. Sir Bedivere's loyalty to the King even when he has lost power and is on his deathbed, is to be seen as paralleling the Victorian's admiration and pride in their Queen and their deep sense of loyalty to her and to the nation. Let us take these lines uttered by Arthur to Sir Bedivere after he laments the demise of the Knights of the Round Table:

And wheresoever I am sung or told
In aftertime, this also shall be known:
But now delay not: take Excalibur,
And fling him far into the middle mere:
Watch what thou seest, and lightly bring me word."
To him replied the bold Sir Bedivere:
"It is not meet, Sir King, to leave thee thus,
Aidless, alone, and smitten thro' the helm.
A little thing may harm a wounded man.
Yet I thy hest will all perform at full,
Watch what I see, and lightly bring thee word.
So saying, from the ruin'd shrine he stept."

Though initially Sir Bedivere is hesitant to leave his King wounded and dying, he agrees to perform all that he had commanded ("yet thy hest will all perform at full") and so saying he steps out in obedience to his King. This is true loyalty, as Sir Bedivere does not refuse to obey a defeated and wounded king who is a king only in name and not a king in action. But when he finds the sword Excalibur beautiful and bright, he decides not to throw the sword into the lake, but he does not want to hurt his King to mistake him as a disobedient soldier. So he tells a falsehood that he had done as he was ordered.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:
"Hast thou perform'd my mission which I gave?"

What is it thou hast seen, or what hast heard?"
 And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:
 "I heard the ripple washing in the reeds,
 And the wild water lapping on the crag."
 To whom replied King Arthur, faint and pale:
 "Thou hast betray'd thy nature and thy name,
 Not rendering true answer, as beseem'd
 Thy fealty, nor like a noble knight:
 For surer sign had follow'd, either hand,
 Or voice, or else a motion of the mere.
 This is a shameful thing for men to lie.
 Yet now, I charge thee, quickly go again
 As thou art lief and dear, and do the thing
 I bade thee, watch, and lightly bring me word

Sir Bedivere tells a lie and the King catches him, chiding him that it is a shameful thing for men to lie. He again asks him to go a second time to do his bidding. Sir Bedivere wrestles within himself and wonders

What good should follow this, if this were done?
 What harm, undone? deep harm to disobey,
 Seeing obedience is the bond of rule.
 Were it well to obey then, if a king demand
 An act unprofitable, against himself?
 The King is sick, and knows not what he does.

He returns and once again utters a lie. King Arthur knows that if the sword had been thrown, Sir Bedivere would have seen a miracle. Hence he repeatedly asks him "What is it thou hast seen, or what hast heard?" King Arthur gets angry that Sir Bedivere had been disloyal and chides him that he, who was the only knight left of his circle has also proved a traitor and behaved in an 'unknightly' manner. Arthur is deeply hurt that the King who has lost his power and is dying is forgotten and disobeyed.

"Ah, miserable and unkind, untrue,
 Unknightly, traitor-hearted! Woe is me!
 Authority forgets a dying king,
 Laid widow'd of the power in his eye
 That bow'd the will. I see thee what thou art,
 For thou, the latest-left of all my knights,
 In whom should meet the offices of all,
 Thou wouldst betray me for the precious hilt;

For a third time, Arthur bids him to do his command and angrily says that if Sir Bedivere failed to do so, the king would slay him. When Sir Bedivere returns after accomplishing the task given to him, the King is pleased:

"Then spoke King Arthur, drawing thicker breath:
"Now see I by thine eyes that this is done.
Speak out: what is it thou hast heard, or seen?"

Sworn loyalty to the King as seen in the lines quoted above, is Tennyson's call to his fellow Victorians to owe allegiance to her Majesty, Queen Victoria.

Thus, the three themes of the poem are

- Change and the courage to accept it when the old order dies giving way to a new order. Change is necessary for progress, for orderly evolution
- Morality that binds the social and familial fabric of the society and
- Loyalty and obedience to the monarch

'Tennyson's poem deals with characteristics of Victorian age, reflected through the prism of the Arthurian legend. The immortality he confers on Arthur's greatness as a King is a pious wish for his friend Arthur Hallam, and contained in it is the wish for the immortality of men of special calibre like Arthur Hallam.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Explain the phrase "let what will be, be". Who says this and in what context?
2. Explain the main themes of the poem "Morte d'Arthur". Quote lines from the poem, supporting your answer.

4.3 SYMBOLS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN "MORTE D'ARTHUR"

What is a symbol in Literature? A symbol is literary device to give several meanings to a word more than its dictionary meaning. This meaning does not appear on a first reading of a line, but when it is read in the context of the whole poem, the different layers of meaning become clear as it is representative of the theme, idea, concept and other features of the poem. As a result, it enhances the meaning and **tenor** of the poem. We have the symbols of the Round Table, and the Excalibur, King Arthur's sword in "Morte d' Arthur. The Round Table with its circular design where all the Knights sat with King Arthur is symbolic of a true democratic spirit of participation, where the King is first among equals. Sitting at the head of a table is to assume an exclusive role of leadership in an environment of diversity. Here King Arthur's Round Table clearly represents the spirit of equality where every knight has his place that is neither superior nor inferior to the others.

The Round Table says a lot about the values that were developing during the Middle Ages. This period was basically a violent period. The Middle ages were fraught with wars against barbarian hordes and many other problems such as the plague, famine, distress and the normal mode of operation was to take something by force. This is what the kings, knights and lords did. The bravery of the King and his knights were hailed as acts of chivalry and heroism. Everyone played his role in the success of the wars that were fought. But through Arthur's reign, there came a shift where there was recognition of the worth of every individual whether he wielded weapons or not.. And the Round Table is a good example of this raising of the individual's value.

King Arthur through the Round Table shifts power from himself to give equal weight to all the knights seated at the table. It is truly democratic despite the fact that it was the rule of monarchy and not democracy in Britain at that time. The King was still the king and only distinguished Knights were at the table. But it was a move toward the belief that everyone is important and everyone equally valuable. King Arthur and his knights met at Arthur's Round Table in Camelot to discuss important issues of the kingdom.

Excalibur is the magic sword of King Arthur. The sword, is regarded as a powerful weapon in the hands of a skilled warrior and retains that reputation. In short, the sword has a magical power only when it is in the hands of a deserving warrior like King Arthur. This is the reason why King Arthur in his dying moments, orders Sir Bedivere to return it to its source-the Lady of the Lake by flinging it into the lake. According to mythological legends, the sword is identified with a single hero and should not be allowed to fall into the hands of an enemy owing to its inherent power, or to another knight - no matter how noble -who might succeed Arthur as king. The sword is a symbol of Arthur's virtue and power. The supernaturalism and mystery of these remote ages, their belief in magic and witchcraft, is seen in the magic sword of King Arthur, and the mystic hand which rises out of the lake at his death to take it away. Tennyson transposes the medieval reference to the mystic "lady of the lake" to his times by speaking about the church or religion and the Excalibur as representing spiritual power.

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
I have lived my life, and that which I have done
May He within Himself make pure! but thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.
But now farewell. I am going a long way.

After Sir Bedivere completes the task, he tells Arthur that he had seen a great miracle he would never forget, the rise of the arm from the lake to grasp the sword. The painful and arduous journey of King Arthur with the help of his loyal Knight towards the lake gives it a mystical touch, as the journey is his final one to a higher and a spiritual plane. Three elegant Queens with gold crowns wait onboard and cry in one voice a moan of agony. This lamentation is like the wind "that shrills / All night in a waste land." Arthur asks to be placed in the barge, and Bedivere

complies. Arthur lays his head in the lap of the tallest Queen, and she loosens his casque (helmet) and calls him by his name. Her tears drop on his bloody pale face. He lies like a “shatter’d column,” very much unlike the heroic figure he once cut. But King Arthur is calm and in his parting speech, he tells Sir Bedivere that he is moving to a peaceful and quiet place, Avillon, an island valley which is a kind of paradise with ideal weather and fertile land.

Lastly the brotherhood of Arthur and Bedivere symbolizes the deep friendship of Tennyson and Hallam, and the profound grief of their severance is manifest in the utter lack of faith or hope that Bedivere is shown to experience at the end of the poem. King Arthur’ final journey to a resting place in a far-off land, invisible to him and accompanied by the mystical figures of the lake gives hope and comfort that Arthur has achieved immortality. This is a poignant wish Tennyson holds for the immortality of Arthur Hallam, his cherished friend about whom he says: I trust he lives in thee, and there / I find him worthier to be loved.

Tennyson in “Morte d’ Arthur” comes to the conclusion that “Somewhere far off, [he is seen to] pass on and on, and go / From less to less and vanish into light’. The poem ends on a note of faith that augurs the onset of the renewal of fresh life of hope and optimism, a beautiful new beginning: “And the new sun rose bringing the new year” (line 469).

Check your progress 2

Explain the symbols and their significance in “Morte d’Arthur” .

4.4 CHARACTERS IN THE POEM

From the analysis given above, you can deduce the characters of King Arthur and Sir Bedivere. Many of Tennyson’s poems were written in the form of **dramatic monologues**. This poem, which marks the conclusion of the epic narrative is not a monologue, but in the form of a dialogue between the two principal characters. King Arthur is seen as a great hero who deserves to possess Excalibur, the glittering, beautiful sword. He behaves like a King even in his dying moments. He commands obedience from Sir Bedivere, the last surviving Knight. His kingly demeanour, his courage and heroic endurance of pain and his graceful passage into the barge to start his journey to a land of calm and peace reveal his valour and courageous acceptance of a new life. His advice to Sir Bedivere who is filled with fear and anxiety not only of losing his King but also of the prospect of an unknown, uncertain future order is at the core of the poem. Sir Bedivere’s loyalty, his genuine concern not to hurt his King in his dying moments, his implicit obedience to the orders of his King and his awe and wonder over the mystical quality of the sword are in conformity with the character of a faithful Knight belonging to King Arthur’s Round Table.

Activity

Read the poem and identify the passages that reveal the characters of King Arthur and Sir Bedivere.

4.5 SUMMING UP

This Unit is a continuation of the earlier Unit 3 and therefore should be read in conjunction with the poem that is given there. In this Unit, we have discussed the poem's themes and Tennyson's skilful use of symbols to convey them. We have explained in this Unit that the poem is in the form of a dialogue that highlights loyalty and obedience to the authority and a mature, philosophical understanding of life where change is constant and therefore to be accepted. We have also looked at the ways in which Tennyson, the Poet Laureate of Britain, transposes medieval values onto his own period, the Victorian Age.

4.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. What are the medieval values highlighted in this poem, and how does the poet relate them to the Victorian age?
2. What is the central theme of the poem? Explain this by comparing it with *In Memoriam*.
3. How does Tennyson praise Queen Victoria, seen through the prism of King Arthur?
4. Give a brief sketch of the two principal characters in the poem.

4.7 GLOSSARY

Transpose: exchange positions without a change in value

Magnum Opus: A great work, a literary or artistic masterpiece

Medievalism: The spirit or the body of beliefs, customs, or practices of the Middle Ages

Impermanence: Not permanent, not lasting.

Mortality: the state or condition of being subject to death

Traumatized: devastated, dismayed

Tenuous: weak, lacking a sound basis

Scepticism: the disbelief in any claims to ultimate knowledge

Efficacy: effectiveness, power or capacity to produce effect

Oddity: strangeness

Allegorical: symbolic, figurative

Infidelity: unfaithfulness to one's spouse or partner

Tenor: the course of thought or meaning that runs through something written or spoken; purport; drift. continuous course, progress, or movement.

4.9 References

1. Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson*, University of California Press.
2. www.britannica.com › Literature › Poetry