

PACIFIST LITERATURE DURING WWII: T. H. WHITE'S *THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING*

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Abstract: *T.H. White, an acclaimed author and one of the representatives of Fantasy and the Matter of Britain in the twentieth century, explores the topic of war in Arthurian society in the novel The Once and Future King (1958). In this article, I will demonstrate the central conundrum of this political allegory as the opposition of "Might versus Right" and Arthur's endeavours toward solutions against violence and warfare. T. H. White and (by extension) Arthur are trying to find an "antidote to war" by exploring types of governing to pinpoint which one is the most pacifist, inspired by the horrors of the Second World War.*

Keywords: *Arthurian Legend; education; future generations; pacifism.*

1. Introduction

"Terence Hanbury White was one of the founding fathers of fantasy in the twentieth century" (Salter 2021) and, along with J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, these three authors are considered amongst the best in the genre and, more specifically, to this article's topic their depiction of war, whether the Great War or World War II. Although all the aforementioned-authors wrote on the same subject, there are significant differentiations in their perspectives: "C. S. Lewis believed that war is sometimes justifiable and necessary" (Demy 2011:2), J. R. R. Tolkien chose a "heroic interpretation of war" (Croft 2002:16), while T. H. White opted for a pacifist point of view.

In this article, readers shall become aware of the main quest of *The Once and Future King* (1958), which is for Merlin and Arthur to find the "antidote to war" through many experiments. The book starts with Arthur as a young child educated by Merlin through magical transformations into several animals. Then, Arthur experiences the animal world while maintaining his human conscience and learning about organised violence. By facing the different lifestyles of the species, he learns about several ways of governing, from totalitarianism to democracy, which he will later apply to his subjects as their king. Throughout my article, the word "king" is written with a capital letter "K" when it is beside a name, as it denotes a royal title, and written with a lowercase letter "k" in any other part of a sentence, as it does not hold a special significance.

Furthermore, when Arthur becomes king, he has to face several members of the nobility who question his position and authority, so inevitably, he starts a war against his opponents. During Arthur's First Battle, T. H. White, through the character of Merlin, points out the horror and carnage war wreaks on simple people and soldiers. At the same time, the honourable knights are protected by their equipment and status, shifting our attention to the social class dimension of war and the unequal cultural impacts of disaster on society. Arthur realises the circumstances that Merlin warned him against since childhood and decides to take action by abolishing the ideology of "Might versus Right". In the context of the novels, White claims that "Might versus Right" is the idea that only the powerful people at the top of the chain of command have the right to take

action and dictate the lives of those below them, either by ruling them or by physically enforcing their decisions and judgements on them. This naturally raises the issue of the morality behind the actions and the way these further segregate the social classes.

Arthur's way of establishing order is the creation of "The Knights of the Round Table" as the defenders of the weak. The knights start as courageous men who set forth to help the innocent and protect the land, but alas when all quests are over, they start turning on each other and competing for fame and glory, thus leaving the country and the people defenceless. With this opportunity, White satirises knighthood and critiques the unnatural nature of combat, which he claims stems from political geography and the extension of national borders. As Arthur's reign continues, he realises that the Knights gradually fail their mission, and he turns their attention towards the "Holy Grail Quest".

The "Holy Grail Quest" on a practical level refers to the search and acquisition of the grail, the cup that according to tradition caught the blood of Christ during the crucifixion, but metaphorically symbolizes the search for the divine in us, enlightenment, resurrection, and the connection between the Kingdom of Camelot to the Kingdom of Heaven. Regrettably, the knights and the land are not deemed worthy of the grail and the quest fails.

Arthur's last resort after his two initial failed plans is the creation of the concept of "Civil Law", where everyone is equal and must answer accordingly. "Civil Law" in this context is the creation of laws and rules that the people of the kingdom must follow, including King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, "The Knights of the Round Table" and the citizens. The laws and their implementation mean that justice prevails and in order for it to be functional everyone must be equally held accountable for their actions. Once again Arthur's plan for the abolition of unequal power fails as Guinevere is caught cheating on him with Lancelot and both must answer to the law quite severely. Both Guinevere and Lancelot escape their respective punishments which gives ground to Mordred, Arthur's son and usurper of the throne to lead the country to war and violence once again for the sake of gaining the crown. After all of Arthur's attempts to maintain peace, the concept of "Might is Right" reappears as the kingdom gradually falls apart.

Ultimately, as the book series comes to a complete cycle, we experience Arthur's final battle. The outcome of the story is that violence is always the natural response to our flawed human nature. White realises the inevitability of destruction experienced during WWII and attempts to contribute via his texts as a way to change the future through education and literature, with Arthur as his innovator king whose ideas endure through the future generations. The end of the book is not completely bleak, as White's ultimate purpose is to educate all readers about the horrors of war, hoping that people will not repeat the mistakes of their forefathers and learn how to transcend disaster.

2.1. WWII and Pacifism

Before diving into the intricate Arthurian world that T. H. White created in his novel, we shall briefly examine the historical context that shaped his worldview and the pacifist ideology that seeped through his fictional writings. T. H. White was heavily influenced by the historical events which were unfolding before, during, and after the Second World War, and therefore his pacifist reply came in the form of his books. Novels about King Arthur are part of the "perpetual recycling of Arthurian mythology at moments of cultural crisis throughout English history" (Semmes 2013: 5), and the Second World War, as a (hu)man-made disaster, qualifies as a

fundamental social and cultural crisis. T. H. White's innovation during a time of war was his firm belief in pacifism, as he advocated in this novel.

British Pacifism was booming during WWII, and "Many Pacifists in the inter-war period, whether they had participated in battle or not, had derived their convictions from the traumas of World War I and its aftermath." (Rempel 1978: 2). T. H. White grew up after the First World War, and his worldview was influenced by the trauma he faced daily in the lives of the people around him and England in general. Like many other people of his generation, White had to anticipate disaster, live through it, recover from it and eventually transcend it in direct correlation to what had transpired during the First World War or the Great War as it was known then:

In the twentieth century, war was more deadly and fought on a much larger scale. Loyalties were no longer with a nation, but with an alliance of nations. [...] It was not a fight for the glory of England as much as a fight for preservation of it. White seemed to take the situation to heart and began to support a pacifist view which did not emphasize loyalties to a nation, but called for the preservation of life. (Semmes 2013: 16)

T. H. White was partaking in the chain of literary Arthurian adaptation since his book *The Once and Future King* was responding to Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), an infamous rewriting of the Arthurian Legend printed during another war, the War of the Roses. Malory depicts war in medieval England as natural and canonical, as a moment when history gives the background to literature. Still, for White, war is not heroic but primitive and violent. War has always played a crucial role in the fantasy genre as a way of defeating evil, but White wanted to propose the importance of a pacifist ideology as a means of salvation rather than radical action.

White, as an acute and educated man, saw the propaganda that was leading up to the war and the actions of Adolf Hitler which had to be faced directly. He could not help but notice that the world was spiralling into chaos: "Hitler had achieved 'what no other person had done'-- he had united in opposition to him in Britain the 'realists' and the 'idealists' who had once been sympathetic to Germany." (Rempel 1978: 31).

In a letter to a friend, White claimed that "the central theme of *Morte d'Arthur* is to find an antidote to war" (Salter 2021), and his tale would bring that theme to new audiences". (Salter 2021). "Peace as an objective was shared by almost the whole country. This was based on both a moral standpoint and on material interests." (Davis 2017: 3). For T.H. White, the antidote to war is literature as it educates the readers of the benefits of peace and Arthur, as a political leader rather than a localised king, would inspire all nations and future generations to obtain from the war as they would know only its disadvantages.

2.2. An Overview of the Book

In anticipation of the analysis of the topic of this article, we shall briefly mention the main ideas of *The Once and Future King* so as to set the chronological order of the fictional events and characters that we shall encounter later on. *The Once and Future King* is comprised of four books: *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (1939), *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940), and *The Candle in the Wind* (1940). The books were re-published together in 1958 as a volume named *The Once and Future King*. The fifth book, *The Book of Merlyn*, was published in 1977 after White's sudden death (Ward 2018:10). According to Ward, "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". (Ward 2018: 10).

The Sword in the Stone narrates Arthur's life as a child under the tutelage of Merlin, the magician and continues with *The Queen of Air and Darkness* and Arthur as a newly-crowned king. *The Ill-Made Knight* recounts Lancelot's life and adventures, and *The Candle in the Wind* relates Arthur's last years as king. *The Book of Merlyn* is a bitter ending to the book series as it is written from Merlin's point of view and rehashes his ideology concerning war and the inevitability of the human tendency towards violence. The moral of the extended story is that only literature and education can save the new generations, as White saw the aftermath of the Second World War and was quite convinced that there was no imminent change on the horizon. T. H. White, through his counterpart Merlin, created a legacy of hope slowly rising from the ashes of war and destruction with the hopes that future readers will take up the mantle of pacifism.

2.3. Natural Education through Animal Transformation

In the first book of *The Once and Future King* collection, titled *The Sword in the Stone*, Merlin educates the young Arthur, otherwise nicknamed Wart, by transforming him and himself into animals and living their lives for a few minutes. White wanted to propose an alternative way of education rather than the tedious and repetitive old style of learning that he was used to, so he wanted Arthur to view life from different perspectives so as to be able to provide different future solutions when he would be king.

White's view was that "Each natural transformation, however, is meant to prepare Wart for the kingship of an ideal country, and each transformation introduces him to the variety of social and political systems he would be likely to encounter during a course in political philosophy". (Smith 1991: 3). White's genius lies in the fact that he "allows us to simultaneously observe humans as well as animals" (Jeunesse 2012: 6) and, ultimately, we observe that animals are quite sophisticated in their way of governing. Humans can learn valuable lessons from them while being uniquely entertained at the same time.

The first transformation that Arthur experienced was becoming a fish in the moat outside the castle. Arthur was transformed into a perch, which is a sweet water fish that eats zooplankton, mosquitoes, fish eggs, and other small fish, and is not as big or as dominant and violent as the fish named "King of the Moat", that was a pike fish since White's purpose was to show their difference in size and ideology. (White 2010: 55).

While most of the fish and other aquatic beings lived together harmoniously, young Arthur was horrified when he saw the "King of the Moat" (White 2010: 62) or as is described: "a face which had been ravaged by all the passions of an absolute monarch – by cruelty, sorrow, age, pride, selfishness, loneliness and thoughts too strong for individual brains". (White 2010: 62). Young Arthur is petrified, though, when the king describes his philosophy based on the principle of power and those strong enough to exercise it: "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". (White 2010: 63).

Arthur was triply shocked, first by the appearance of the "absolute monarch" (White 2010: 62), secondly by the ideology of "Might is Right" (White 2010: 63) and third and most importantly by the fact that he tried to eat him, and therefore proving his ideology on the spot: the big fish eats the small fish. As a result, Arthur learned from a young age that absolute power is intoxicating, unjustly exercised, and a way of governing that he disapproved of.

The next magical transformation was into a bird (a merlin) (White 2010: 91) when Arthur spent the night with the hawks and became familiar with militarism. "Among the hawks in the

mews at night he learns the ways of the military, with its boot camp initiations, complex pedigrees and hierarchies, and ritualized modes of social interaction". (Smith 1991: 4).

Arthur realised that the hawks he admired so much during their hunting trips together were, as Merlin describes, a "Spartan military mess". (White 2010: 94). White goes on to associate the hawks and their attitude with actual military positions through the behaviour of Colonel Cully, a hawk that, in today's terms, we could say suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as the birds confess that "her ladyship spoke to him from her full social station once, cavalry to infantry, you know, and that he just closed his eyes and got the vertigo. He has never been the same since." (White 2010: 98). After being terrorised by the hawks and their strict rules, Arthur comes to the realisation that they are "a horrible, grand crew!" (White 2010: 105) and, by extension, he came to hate militarism.

Arthur's next magical lesson is being transformed into an insect, specifically an ant. Then, he became educated about fascist totalitarianism: "As an ant he experiences life in a totalitarian state: the ants have numbers instead of names, no language adequate to free thought, an unquestioned devotion to their 'Mammy'". (Smith 1991: 4).

White clearly wanted to associate the ants with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany as the ants sang: "Antland, Antland Over All, and the stream of orders were discontinued in favour of lectures about war, patriotism or the economic situation". (White 2010: 156). Young Arthur becomes sick of the mentality of the ants as he claims:

The repeating voices in his head, which he could not shut off – the lack of privacy, under which others ate from his stomach while the others again sang in his brain – the dreary blank which replaced feeling – the dearth of all but two values – the total monotony more than the wickedness: these had begun to kill the joy of life... (White 2010: 159).

The most appreciated transformation by Arthur was into a Wild Goose. Contrary to the previous transformations that only lasted a few hours at best, Arthur enjoyed living with the Wild Geese to such an extent that he even migrated with them for the season (of course, time flew differently due to Merlin's magic and young Arthur was not missed). The geese were pacifists and democrats, so they all lived together harmoniously while sharing their obligations, such as standing guards. Arthur started speaking with another goose named Lyo-lyok, asking her about the sentry guards and whether the geese were at war. The goose was not familiar with the concept of organized violence, and she replied: "But what creatures could be so low as to go about in bands, to murder others of its own blood?" (White 2010: 209). After all the shocking and violent revelations concerning animal nature and the common ground between human nature being war, Arthur was relieved when he realised that there are also peaceful alternatives.

Arthur's last educational transformation was into a mammal and, more specifically, a badger. Badgers lived together in holes that were organised and admirable, and Arthur was impressed by "the Great Hall most, for this was the central room of the tumulus – it was difficult to know whether to think of it as a college or as a castle" (White 2010: 234). Badgers live together harmoniously and were occupied with writing theses and philosophical questions concerning life while paying their respects to their ancestors "All round the panelled walls there were ancient paintings of departed badgers, famous in their day for scholarship or godliness". (White 2010: 234). The Badger that Arthur was conversing with started talking to him about his doctoral thesis and the nature of animals and humans when Arthur turned the conversation towards the issue of war. Badger's answer left Arthur speechless: "True warfare is rarer in Nature than cannibalism. Don't you think that is a little unfortunate?" (White 2010: 240).

After Arthur visited the pacifist geese and the philosophically chivalrous badgers, the young boy finished his education feeling that there were several ways of organizing communities and multiple examples that would act as examples in his near future as the king. Through Arthur's adventures, the readers also become aware that war is considered unnatural, violent, and despicable, a lesson that T. H. White was adamant about passing on to future generations to avoid the horrors he witnessed during the Second World War.

2.4. King Arthur's First Battle

At the end of the first book, *The Sword in the Stone*, Arthur pulls the sword out of the stone and is crowned king. Unfortunately for him, some nobles refused to acknowledge his authority as they did not know he was King Uther's son and legitimate heir to the throne or had personal ambitions concerning his position. At the beginning of the second book, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, Arthur, as a young, inexperienced, and naive king, has to face his opponents in battle in an effort to solidify his claim to the throne.

Through his first battle, T. H. White wants to emphasize the perspectivism he experienced from his various encounters with the animals and their political systems and apply them to humans, as Arthur would have to really feel the different painful points of view of a battle. After the battle is over, young King Arthur and Merlin admire the outcome from a tall tower, and Merlin is utterly disappointed in his pupil:

(Merlin) -But look at the country. Look at the barns burned, and dead men's legs sticking out of ponds, and horses with swelled bellies by the roadside, and mills falling down, and money buried, and nobody daring to walk abroad with gold or ornaments on their clothes. That is chivalry nowadays. That is the Uther Pendragon touch. And then you talk about a battle being fun! (White 2010: 276)

Arthur was selfishly thinking of himself and the fact that he won the battle and did not have to fear for himself anymore. Still, he completely disregarded the simple soldiers who were killed, as the knights were fully protected by their equipment or the people who were directly affected. T. H. White, through Merlin, his representative, wants to remind the readers that there is no justified cause for war, even if it is an ideal like justice and freedom, as he claims there are far worse losses, like the loss of human lives on both sides, besides the practical issues like the destruction of the economy and the general delay of everyday life. Young King Arthur has to face the impacts of disaster as it affects many fields, such as the primary physical impact, the psychological trauma, and the cultural implications. Arthur, as a king, must own up to his responsibility in regard to the community he created and the impacts of the disaster of war on its perpetrators, accomplices, and, ultimately, its victims.

After realising the horror and carnage that he has inflicted on his subjects, Arthur comes to the conclusion that “- ‘Might isn't Right, is it, Merlyn?’” (White 2010: 276). Once again, the book's main topic is the admittance that those with power should not be free to exercise it as they desire, much less in a violent manner in organized combat.

2.5. Knights of the Round Table: from Fashionable Chivalry to Fanaticism

Arthur recognised his mistake in taking human lives for granted, so he devised a plan to channel the knights' power for a good cause. Therefore, he created the “Knights of the Round Table”, who would use their might only for the right reasons, like defending the weak and poor, protecting women, and never using violence for vengeance. Arthur said, “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" (White 2010: 241).

The "Knights of the Round Table" served Arthur's purpose well initially, and the kingdom prospered during the peace. Unfortunately for Arthur's ingenuity, the knights started becoming restless as they began competing with each other, as there were no other noble quests left. They turned "superficial, materialistic, and violent" (Ward 2018: 30), precisely the opposite of what Arthur needed them to be, so he had to come up with another solution.

2.6. The Holy Grail Quest

Arthur redirects the "Knights of the Round Table" and their power towards the service of God by asking them to find the Holy Grail (the legendary cup that caught Christ's blood at the crucifixion). He diverts their attention from their petty quarrels.

The legendary Holy Grail Quest is a physical, mental, and emotional test that only the best knights can pass. Some of Arthur's finest knights are proved worthy, some are lost, some die, and ultimately, the kingdom is left undefended and weak. "Although the quest for the Grail is supposed to be the saving grace of his kingdom, it only ends with death. Might-for-right, Arthur realizes, is still violence". (Jeunesse 2012: 12).

2.7. Civil Law

In *The Candle in the Wind* and, after two failed attempts to harness "Might for Right", Arthur realises that he must abolish justice based on power games. He establishes "right as a criterion of its own... justice as an abstract thing which... [does] not lean upon power" (Ward 2018: 34). His third and final idea of ideal governing is using right for right. He institutes a system of Common Law, intending to uphold a just society.

For this justice system to work, everyone must be equal: the king, the queen, the knights, and all the people. Arthur becomes aware of the implications of this system and warns Guinevere and Lancelot not to be caught, as he would have no power to defend them.

Arthur's illegitimate son, Mordred, devises a scheme to catch Guinevere and Lancelot together, which comes to fruition, so the queen and the finest knight of the kingdom are exposed as secret lovers, and Arthur as a husband who has been betrayed. The kingdom is divided and falls into despair as "Justice ultimately does not work because of its "impersonality;" the law cannot sense the motives and intentions of people". (Ward 2018: 35).

2.8. "Right is Right" in The Last Battle

Arthur is sadly unable to control the situation and turmoil that the love affair created. In the end, the only possible outcome is a battle between the two sides, Arthur and Mordred, to prove who was "Right" by exercising violence and "Might". It is quite disheartening to realise that all of Arthur's noble ideals and plans always turn awry, as human nature is imperfect.

Right before the final battle, Arthur agreed with Mordred by offering half his kingdom, hoping to appease his son and his bloodlust since Arthur knew that "peace was more important than a kingdom" (White 2010: 922). For a moment, it seemed as if the two opposing armies would not meet in battle,

“But, at that knife—edge of a moment, the old Adam reared itself in a different form. The feudal war, baronial oppression, individual might, even ideological rebellion: he had settled them all in one way or another, only to be beaten on the last lap now, by the episodic fact that 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 and swung his hand across his body, his armlet with the whip showing for a second’s flash. The bright sword flamed into being, to destroy the so—called viper. The waiting armies, taking it for treachery, raised their shout of rage.” (White 2010: 923).

2.9. The End?

The ending of *The Book of Merlyn* is tragic as we realise that despite Arthur’s best intentions, the outcome is always violent, as T. H. White proposes that human nature itself is violent and uncontrollable. He also believes “that man’s tendency toward warfare stems from both a biological part of his brain, and the fact that he owns land” (Ward 2018: 51).

Nevertheless, the readers must not despair as there is always hope, especially hope for the future, through literature, education, and history. Before Arthur joined his last battle, he spoke to a young boy while resting in his tent. “This page was called young Tom of Newbold Revell near Warwick, and the old King sent him off before the battle, upon pain of dire disgrace. You see, the King wanted there to be somebody left, who would remember their famous idea”. (White 2010: 794).

T. H. White, through Arthur, passes the idea that what remains of our lives are stories to be passed on from generation to generation. So, he does to none other than Thomas Malory, the writer of *Le Morte d’Arthur*, the most celebrated Arthurian novel of the Middle Ages. Though this is a complete fiction of White’s wild imagination, the hope for a better future is the only idea that is worth enduring.

2.10. Famous Last Words

T. H. White closes his book with this quote: “EXPLICIT LIBER REGIS QUONDAM REGISQUE FUTURI” (meaning: “Here ends the book of the once and future king”) (White 2010: 797) and underneath is also written: “THE BEGINNING” (White 2010: 797). On the one hand, through this phrase we realise that the book is coming to an end as is Arthur’s life as well, but on the other hand, we grasp the fact that our moment comes now, to follow the pacifist advice of White, and lead a peaceful future, thus the beginning of our story.

Unlike Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (The Death of Arthur), White wanted to focus on the eternal ideal of a good king, *The Once and Future King*, and not Arthur’s demise. T. H. White knew that even if he lived in the darkest moments of history during the Second World War, there was still hope for the future. “Arthur is the once and future king; once during his life and in the future as his legacy is carried by Thomas Malory” (Semmes 2013: 31).

3. Conclusion

T. H. White dared to go against the current of his time during WWII and the war propaganda encouraging people to take to arms; instead, he proposed pacifism and the continuation of life. As we know from history, such an idea was impossible and non-advisable as Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich was closing in on the United Kingdom and all over Europe. Therefore, the author managed to combine the historical events of the Second World War with the Arthurian fictional canon.

As White expressed in *The Once and Future King*, it is a part of human nature to participate in warfare and violence; sometimes, it is even considered noble and heroic, as was the case in the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. During the five novels White wrote, Arthur and his tutor Merlin tried to find the “antidote to war”, a way to stop violence once and for all. Merlin’s magical education gave him a great understanding of nature and the distinct ways of governing Arthur who tried to implement ideas such as “The Knights of the Round Table”, the “Holy Grail Quest”, and “Civil Law”, but it became evident by the end of the book that nothing is as powerful as the ideology of “Might is Right”.

T. H. White’s book urges the readers to pick up the mantle and follow the road of pacifism. Arthur’s story acts as an example of a life full of violence, yet he and Merlin attempt to find a pacifist way of governing a country, and by extension leading a life. This was relatable to the contemporary readers of the books as they had experienced the Second World War and perhaps the Cold War as some of the books were written during that time. The pacifist message that White was promoting must have struck a nerve as it was very close to reality. Ultimately, White wanted to educate future generations about the horrors of violence and war and instil a peaceful message in the hearts of the readers, as a non-violent future was to be gained through the power of education and literature.

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