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A study of the genre of T.H. White's Arthurian books.

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A Study of the Genre of T.H. White's
Arthurian Books

A Thesis for the Degree of Ph.D from the University of Wales

Susan Elizabeth Chapman

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Summary

T.H. White's Arthurian books have been consistently popular with the general public, but have received limited critical attention. It is possible that such critical neglect is caused by the books' failure to conform to the generic norms of the mainstream novel, the dominant form of prose fiction in the twentieth century. This thesis explores the way in which various genres combine in The Once and Future King.

Genre theory, as developed by Northrop Frye and Alastair Fowler, is the basis of the study. Neither theory is applied fully, but Frye's and Fowler's ideas about the function of genre as an interpretive tool underpin the study.

The genre study proper begins with an examination of the generic repertoire of the mainstream novel. A study of The Once and Future King in relation to this form reveals that it exhibits some of its features, notably characterization and narrative, but that it conspicuously lacks the kind of setting typical of the mainstream novel.

A similar approach is followed with other subgenres of prose fiction: the historical novel; romance; fantasy; utopia. In each case The Once and Future King is found to exhibit some key features, unique to that form, although without sufficient of its characteristics to be described fully in those terms.

The function of the comic and tragic modes within The Once and Future King is also considered. White succeeds in combining the two to create a particular sense of idealism and loss.

White combines in his Arthurian books some of the features of an unusually large number of genres. As a result they defy simple categorization but repay close and imaginative study.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Interest in the Arthurian legends has fluctuated over the centuries: sometimes the stories have occupied a pre-eminent position as quarries for all kinds of artistic production, but at others interest in Arthur has waned almost to nothing. At present stories about King Arthur seem to be at a high point of popularity: "whereas the first half of this century produced less than fifty novels of Arthurian provenance, the last thirty years have produced more than twice that number."¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that The Once and Future King² is T.H. White's best known work. White himself would not have been surprised at this. He wrote:

Dont forget that this is The Matter of Britain! Look at this short list, my lad: Nennius, Geoffrey, Malory, Purcell, Hughes, (Milton), Tennyson, T.H. White. You could treble it, but I am mentioning the important ones. This is a letter from a man they will be putting in the literary histories,

¹ Raymond H. Thompson, The Return From Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction, Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, No. 14 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 3.

² T.H. White The Once and Future King (London: Collins, 1958), all further references to this work appear in the text.

Pottés [sic]: yes, willy-nilly. The subject does it. A man who wrote out the Morte d'Arthur in Morse Code would still have to be mentioned in literary histories, because it is the Morte d'Arthur.³

White's work other than The Once and Future King is relatively unknown. He was^a prolific writer: between 1929 and 1959 he published twenty-five books, and four more were published posthumously. The remarkable feature of his work, however, is not quantity but variety: it includes poetry, novels, sporting diaries, essays, popular history, and a translation of a twelfth-century Latin bestiary. Naturally, the quality of his work varies, and the early novels, with the exception of Farewell Victoria,⁴ are not worthy of close attention. In some respects, however, the variety of his work has contributed to the neglect that it has suffered.⁵ Because he is not easily classifiable as a novelist, diarist, historian, or natural history writer, White has not been widely acknowledged as any of these, much less as all of them.

In the years since his death White's work has received meagre critical attention. Only one full-length study has

³ François Gallix, Letters to a Friend: The Correspondence Between T.H. White and L.J. Potts (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), p. 118.

⁴ T.H. White, Farewell Victoria, (1930; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945).

⁵ François Gallix, T.H. White: An Annotated Bibliography (London: Garland, 1986), p. xix.

been published,⁶ although there have been four unpublished theses and a number of articles. The most interesting work published on White has been biographical. Sylvia Townsend Warner's T.H. White: A Biography⁷ contains some valuable criticism of his work. In a less analytic vein David Garnett's edition of his correspondence with White, The White/Garnett Letters,⁸ and François Gallix's collection, Letters to a Friend: The Correspondence between T.H. White and L.J. Potts, both give insights into White's life and practice as a writer.

The lack of critical attention paid even to White's major books is due, I would argue, to the difficulty critics face in classifying his work. Only his choice of subject clearly aligns him with other writers and his place in Arthurian literature is acknowledged.⁹ Classification of a work is not the purpose of criticism; but it is a prerequisite of criticism, because the wrong criteria are likely to produce a mistaken evaluation. It seems likely that White's Arthurian books have been ignored because it is not clear to which literary categories they belong and therefore how they should be approached. The purpose of the present study is to examine White's books in relation to various genres of

⁶ John K. Crane, T.H. White, Twayne's English Authors Series, No. 172 (New York: Twayne, 1974).

⁷ Sylvia Townsend Warner, T.H. White: A Biography, (London: Jonathan Cape and Chatto and Windus, 1967).

⁸ David Garnett, ed. The White/Garnett Letters (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968).

⁹ Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, The Return of King Arthur: British and American Arthurian Literature Since 1800 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), pp. 291-5.

extended prose fiction and to show how elements of each combine to create the unique quality of the works. The study will focus mainly on The Once and Future King, but will also refer to White's other Arthurian works.¹⁰

The study begins with a brief examination of genre theory, concentrating mainly on the work of Northrop Frye and Alastair Fowler. Historically genre has been an important concept in criticism and its place there is discussed, together with the possibility of its misuse. The main features of Frye's and Fowler's theories, particularly their different ideas about genre and mode, are then briefly described and commented upon. The latter's view of genre as a fundamental tool of interpretation underpins the examination of White's work that follows. A study of a work in terms of various genres could suggest that the work itself is fragmented. This possibility is all the stronger in a work like The Once and Future King, which is composed of four books. Chapter Three therefore is devoted to establishing the unity of The Once and Future King as a whole. Whilst it is undoubtedly a book of great variety, all the parts are held together by the common thread of Arthur's character, which develops, but does not change

¹⁰ For a full history of the various parts of White's Arthurian work see Gallix, Bibliography, pp. 15-23, 39-43, 45-47. All further references to the Arthurian books will appear in the text and be distinguished as follows: The Once and Future King page reference only; The Sword in the Stone, The Witch in the Wood, and The Ill-Made Knight, denote those books as first published; "The Sword in the Stone", "The Queen of Air and Darkness", and "The Ill-Made Knight" indicate those stories as parts of The Once and Future King; "The Candle in the Wind" and The Book of Merlyn were published only in a single form. For bibliographical details, see my bibliography, p. 396 below.

fundamentally, throughout the book.

The novel is the dominant form of prose fiction in the twentieth century. Chapters Four and Five therefore commence the generic examination of The Once and Future King starting with the novel. Setting, narrative, and characterization are identified as three main features of the novel, and their presence or absence in White's Arthurian books is discussed. A similar procedure is followed in the chapters devoted to the historical novel, the romance, fantasy, and utopian fiction. Each chapter attempts to identify the main elements of a genre, which of them appear in White's books, and what is their function there. I shall argue that the absence of a generic element, when other features suggests its presence, is a significant factor in the generic composition of a work. Chapter Ten is slightly different because it examines the place of the comic and tragic modes, rather than genres, in The Once and Future King. The approach, however, is similar in that it considers the main features of the comic and tragic modes, and whether such elements are to be found in The Once and Future King. The genre of White's Arthurian books is also influenced by their relationship to Le Morte Darthur.¹¹ The way in which White selects and uses material from Malory will be considered throughout this study.

¹¹ White seems to have used two editions of Malory. Kurth Sprague in "From A Troubled Heart: T.H. White and Women in The Once and Future King," (Diss. University of Texas at Austin 1978) notes that White's library contained a copy of Le Morte d'Arthur 2 vols ed. Ernest Rhys (London: Dent, 1934, 1935) with "notes scattered throughout it" (p. 105) and a copy of Sir Edward Strachey's edition (London: Macmillan, 1899) and that "it is the Strachey edition which is most profusely

In the discussion of theory it will be shown that generic mixtures, particularly of mode and genre, are not uncommon. The unusual feature of The Once and Future King, together with White's other Arthurian books, is the range of genres that affect interpretation. The aim of this study is to show that such a variety of genres can co-exist effectively in a single work. In the case of T.H. White's Arthurian books, the influence of so many genres is a vital feature of their unique quality.

annotated, and it is this copy which I suppose White to have relied upon" (p. 105). In the following study I have used the two editions that White seems to have used and Caxton's Malory: A New Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur 2 vols. ed. James V. Spisak and William Matthews (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1983) as the most recent edition of Caxton. References are to Spisak only unless there is a variation in readings. All references to Spisak are given parenthetically in the text.

Chapter Two

The Theoretical Basis of the Genre Study

Readers and critics seem to have a fundamental need to describe literary works in terms of genre. The question, "What are you reading?" is often answered in those terms: "I'm reading a novel/biography/collection of poetry." Critical, or pre-critical, judgements of literary works are made by recognising the generic code of a work and judging it accordingly. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the theoretical basis of this practice with particular reference to two influential works of genre theory: Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism¹ and Alastair Fowler's Kinds of Literature,² and to justify my choice of the latter as the theoretical basis of this study.

¹Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957).

²Alastair Fowler, Kinds Of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

An interest in genre can be traced back to the earliest literary criticism. Plato distinguishes between various kinds of literature both according to subject -- gods, heroes, and men -- and according to the manner of presentation, whether narrative or dramatic.³ The first major post-classical interest in literary criticism developed in renaissance Italy, and many of the influential theories developed in that period are concerned with generic distinctions. Minturno's theory, for example, regards poetry in general as the product of imitation, but his "discussion of the poem itself must be in terms of the genre to which it belongs, for there is a very elaborate system of divisions into kinds and numerous bases of distinction among them."⁴ Scaliger, too, based his hierarchical concept of literature on genre:

...the most noble, of course, are hymns and paeans. In the second place are songs and odes and scolia, which are concerned with the praises of brave men. In the third place the epic, in which there are heroes and other lesser personages. Tragedy together with comedy follows this order; nevertheless comedy will hold fourth place apart by itself. After these, satires, then exodia, lusus, nuptial songs, elegies, monodia, songs, epigrams.⁵

Both Scaliger and Minturno were attempting to increase understanding of literature by classifying literary works and

³ Plato, The Republic, trans. A.D. Lindsay, introd. Renford Bambrough (London: Dent, 1969), pp. 58-76.

⁴ Bernard Weinberg, A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) II, 741.

⁵ Julius Caesar Scaliger, Poetics, quoted and translated by Weinberg, II, 745.

establishing relationships between the different kinds of works. This practice has remained an important element in literary theory since the Renaissance. Fowler, however, notes that "neoclassical criticism is thought of as having been consistently and severely prescriptive in cast, which has given rise to the misapprehension that generic types are necessarily of that character."⁶ He concludes that there is a prescriptive element in genre, but he argues that it need not be a restriction on the writer, rather the reverse. The generic rules form a basis for the writer to work from or against, and also guide the readers' interpretation of a work. The value of genre in criticism, rather than in prescription or classification, has also been recognised by some earlier twentieth-century theorists. Wellek and Warren argued that:

theory of genres is a principle of order: it classifies literature and literary history not by time or place (period or national language) but by specifically literary types of organization or structure. Any critical and evaluative -- as distinct from historical -- study involves, in some form, the appeal to such structures.⁷

The study of genre, then, is as old as the study of literature; and it may be understood not as an arid system of classification, but as the principal tool of interpretation.

Before examining Fowler's theory in detail, the contribution of Northrop Frye to twentieth-century genre study must be acknowledged. Anatomy of Criticism is one of the

⁶ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 26.

⁷ René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (1949; rpt. London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p. 235.

most influential works of critical theory of our time and Frye's contribution to an understanding of romance is particularly relevant to this study. He attempts to create a system of criticism which accounts for all literary forms, places them in a hierarchy, and relates them to the seasonal cycle. Together with genre itself, two other terms important in Frye's theory must be considered. The first of them is mode. Frye divides all fiction into five modes according to the relative status of hero and reader:

1) In myth the hero is superior in kind to other men and the environment of other men; he is a god.

2) In romance the hero is superior in degree to other men and his environment. In the romance world ordinary laws are suspended.

3) The hero of the high mimetic mode (epic and tragedy) is superior in degree to other men but not to his environment; he is a leader.

4) In the low mimetic mode (comedy and realistic fiction) the hero is superior neither to other men nor the environment; he is one of us.

5) The hero of the ironic mode is inferior in power or intelligence to us.²

This list is manifestly hierarchic: the relative positions of the various modes depend on the status of the hero. This recalls Scaliger's system, but Frye's greater historical perspective allows him to see a change in the relative dominance of modes: "European fiction, during the

² Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 33-4.

last fifteen centuries, has steadily moved its center of gravity down the list."⁹ Furthermore, the pattern is cyclical: irony "moves steadily towards myth, and the dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it."¹⁰ Frye's theory of modes is a diachronic system in which modes are modified over time and from which a set pattern emerges. It accounts for various different forms of literature and how the pattern of dominance changes among them.

Frye's second theoretical term is mythos. His theory identifies four mythoi, or generic plots: comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire and irony. The characteristic plot movements of the mythoi correspond to spring, summer, autumn, and winter respectively. Within this scheme generic mixture is possible:

Tragedy and comedy contrast rather than blend, and so do romance and irony, the champions respectively of the ideal and the actual. On the other hand, comedy blends insensibly into satire at one extreme and into romance at the other; romance may be comic or tragic; tragic extends from high romance to bitter and ironic realism.¹¹

Frye's principal discussion of genre proper is found in the "Fourth Essay" of his Anatomy of Criticism. The basis of his concept of genre is rhetorical "in the sense that genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and

⁹ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 34.

¹⁰ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 42.

¹¹ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 162.

his public."¹² He identifies the "radical of presentation" as an essential feature of genre according to which "words may be acted in front of a spectator; they may be spoken in front of a listener; they may be sung or chanted; or they may be written for a reader."¹³ This idea is useful as far as it goes, in establishing the meaning of genre on the broadest level, and recalls Plato's classification. From this basis Frye continues:

The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify...traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out large numbers of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them. ¹⁴

The present study is based on this idea of the purpose of genre criticism, as modified by Fowler's ideas on interpretation which are discussed below.

Frye rejects the idea of genre criticism as classification, even dispensing with the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. However, he creates a system of categories in which to place works that have defied classification. Genre criticism faces the problem of how to approach a work for which no generic name exists, and Frye complains of the paucity of generic terms in English.¹⁵ The lack of names is a particular problem with prose genres.

¹² Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 247.

¹³ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 246-7.

¹⁴ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 247-8.

¹⁵ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 246.

Frye identifies four kinds of prose: novel, anatomy, confession, and romance,¹⁶ but the terms confession and anatomy have not been widely adopted by critics. Indeed, Fowler has questioned the value of anatomy as a genre.¹⁷ It seems that the invention or revival of generic labels will not necessarily encourage the kind of generic criticism that Frye envisaged.

Frye's discussion of the terms "novel" and "romance" is, however, relevant to this study. The term "novel" is commonly used to denote extended prose fiction of almost every kind. As a result the term has lost its particularity and, he argues, is applied to works to which it is not appropriate. According to Frye the prose romance "is an independent form of fiction to be distinguished from the novel and extracted from the miscellaneous heap of prose works now covered by that term."¹⁸ The main distinction between the two forms is in the treatment of character:

The novelist deals with personality, with characters wearing their personae or social masks. He needs the framework of a stable society, and many of our best novelists have been conventional to the verge of fussiness. The romancer deals with individuality, with characters in vacuo idealised by revery, and, however conservative he may be, something nihilistic and untameable is likely to keep breaking out of his pages.¹⁹

¹⁶ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 312.

¹⁷ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 119.

¹⁸ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 305.

¹⁹ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 305.

A more detailed account of the features of romance, inevitably owing much to Frye, will be given in Chapter Seven. At present it is Frye's contribution to the understanding of prose fiction genres which is important. By identifying romance as a form that did not die out in the Middle Ages, and describing the characteristics that distinguish it from the novel, he gives a framework for the understanding of works which are difficult to place in the tradition of the mainstream novel.

The theory of genre, mode, and mythos presented in Anatomy of Criticism is a useful starting point for a study of generic systems. It is schematic in approach and, in this respect, has much in common with earlier generic systems. This demonstrates the continued importance of genre and related terms as critical tools, but such theories rely heavily on categorisation, and are open to misuse. Graham Hough identifies two objections to Frye's structure:

The account given of the structure of literature, in terms of myth and archetype, is far from being the orderly and scientific affair that it is alleged to be; and even if it were, literary works like other works of art are constructed to be objects of value; so value judgments cannot be peripheral and accidental things; they must be of central importance.²⁰

The symmetry of Frye's structure encourages a taxonomic approach, concentrating on the common features of groups to the detriment of a work's unique qualities, and although

²⁰ Graham Hough, An Essay on Criticism (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1966), p. 8.

Frye's ideas on romance will be discussed more fully below, I have chosen not to base this study on his generic system as a whole.

The construction of a system of genres may not be appropriate at all. An understanding of the way that genres function, which does not rely on external systems such as the seasonal cycle or fixed relationships between kinds, can be found in Alastair Fowler's Kinds of Literature. He regards genre as fundamental to criticism, but is more successful than Frye in going beyond the classificatory system to reveal genre as a tool of interpretation.²¹ Fowler argues that the recognition of generic codes at a variety of levels guides the readers' expectations of a work. Generic guides include not only the obvious external forms, such as poetry, prose, or drama, but also titles, the names of characters, allusions and formulae. As an interpretative tool genre works at all levels of literature. It follows, therefore, that if a work is identified as belonging to the wrong genre, not only misinterpretation, but a false evaluation can result. Elsewhere, Fowler cites Johnson's response to Lycidas²² as an example of such misguided judgement.

White is generally acknowledged as a minor author who has produced one major work, the significance of which lies mainly

²¹ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 38.

²² Alastair Fowler, "The Life and Death of Literary Forms," New Literary History, 2 (1971), 201.

in its subject.²³ The critical response to his work has been limited. Only about a dozen articles have appeared, mostly in journals specialising in fantasy. As a result there has been something of a failure to recognise the variety of genres present in The Once and Future King. Ed Chapman, for example, argues that The Once and Future King is a failure:

In The Sword in the Stone, [White] presents some effective numinous images. These are sorely lacking in the other books. The Arthurian legend provides an immense range of possibilities for numinous imagery. Malory has great success in making Merlin and the Grail legend numinous. Tennyson at least makes the death of Arthur a powerfully numinous event. But White does little with these events; Merlin is already on the way to becoming the bungling clown of the Walt Disney film. For the story of the Grail, White says, we must go to Malory. This is an abysmal confession of defeat.²⁴

The absence of the numinous in The Once and Future King is not a fault, as Chapman argues. White's work contains an element of fantasy, which I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter Eight, but his is not the kind of numinous fantasy created by for instance George Macdonald or C.S. Lewis. A correct understanding of genre does not demand that a single work should exhibit all the features of a single kind of literature. It is particularly dangerous to do this to The Once and Future King, which is a striking and interesting mixture of kinds of literature.

²³ White himself drew attention to the importance of his subject in a letter to L.J. Potts dated 6th December 1940, quoted above p. 2.

²⁴ Ed Chapman, "Images of the Numinous in T.H. White and C.S. Lewis," Mythlore, 4, No. 4 (June 1977), 6.

I shall concentrate the following discussion on those elements of Kinds of Literature of which I have made most use, and ignore the parts of its argument that are not relevant to this study. I take my terms from Fowler's book and use them in the sense defined there, and it may therefore be helpful to clarify those senses and distinguish them from different uses of the same terms in other theories. The term "genre" itself is used in the broadest sense, to indicate a group of similar works. Fowler does not limit the definition of genre, as he does other terms, but uses it in a general way, for example, in the expressions genre theory or generic mixture. "Kind" is the principal generic grouping and is defined as "equivalent to 'historical genres.'"²⁵ This definition depends largely on accepted practice in that the meaning of the term tragedy, for example, is given historically, although there are, of course, subdivisions of tragedy. Generic categories have an historical basis and always refer back to earlier literature, but Fowler argues that kinds are not historically fixed: "the kinds are subject to change; but that does not destroy their coherence, any more than that of other institutions."²⁶ Kinds are the genres whose external forms are generally recognised and accepted, but the kind, or any other generic grouping, is not governed by external form alone. As many elements as possible of the "generic repertoire" must be taken into account when discussing kind. Fowler uses the expression generic

²⁵ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 56.

²⁶ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 74.

repertoire to indicate "the whole range of potential points of resemblance that a genre may exhibit."²⁷

"Subgenre" denotes groups on a more detailed level than kind. A kind of literature may be divided into several subgenres, whose "features are more or less disjunct subsets of the sets of features characterizing kinds."²⁸ The special quality of subgenre is often related to its subject: the regional novel and the novel of manners, for example, are both subgenres of the mainstream novel, distinguished principally by subject. It would, however, be misleading to see external form as the indicator of kind, and subject as the indicator of subgenre. The two elements work together; one may have more influence on kind and the other on subgenre, but there is no sharp break between them. A regional novel, for example, may present speech in dialect, but this would be unlikely in a novel of manners.

Fowler recognises that the inclusiveness of the term "novel" makes it very imprecise. Nevertheless, he prefers to retain it because it is in such common use that to attempt to restrict its meaning, as Frye does, could cause confusion: "it is too deeply in the grain of criticism to be removed without endangering continuity."²⁹ The result is that the subgenres of the novel become more important than those of other kinds.

²⁷ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 55.

²⁸ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 112.

²⁹ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 120.

Fowler recognizes the generic distinction between the mainstream novel and romance: "the first of these realistic and detailed like its nonfictional formal models; the second more poetic, less minute, freer. External society and character are recognized in the former, in the latter deep emotional experience," however, he continues:

We now distinguish other subgenres beside the romance and the verisimilar or "central" novel. There is the picaresque novel, the multi-plot novel, the stream-of-consciousness novel or novel of lyrical impressionism, the antinovel, the faction or documentary novel, the historical novel. These are all distinct subgenres of "novel" in its weak sense.³⁰

The present study is concerned with distinguishing the subgenres of the novel present in White's Arthurian books. It must be stressed that the term novel is used to indicate the whole range of extended prose fiction, commonly called by that name; Frye's "miscellaneous heap." I prefer to retain the term, as Fowler does, because to restrict its meaning would conflict with general usage, and the cause of clarity is not necessarily served by a specialized use of a common term. Fowler argues that the generic features of a kind are historically given. The novel is usually taken to be a fictional prose work of a substantial length. I shall pursue this discussion further when considering the generic repertoire of the mainstream novel as a subgenre, for which narrower limits can be drawn. It is important at this stage, however, to note that the mainstream novel is a subgenre of the novel, as is the historical novel, the romance, the utopia, and

³⁰ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 121-2.

fantasy.

In understanding subgenre as a division of kind a strict generic system should not be inferred. Fowler's theory of genres is flexible and as such can reflect the flexibility of literature. Attempts to force literary productions into a rigid framework are likely to fail when applied to individual works because the creation of a framework or system takes account of broad literary features, rather than the individuality of the work.

The term "mode" has been widely used in genre theory but Fowler does not use the term in Frye's sense. In Frye's system, as has been explained above, there are five fictional modes which are governed by the relative status of the hero and the audience. Fowler's usage does not depend on an external relationship but defines mode in relation to kind and subgenre. His concept of mode is more open than Frye's. He summarizes the relationship between kind and mode thus:

The terms for kinds, perhaps in keeping with their obvious external embodiment, can always be put in noun form ("epigram"; "epic"), whereas modal terms tend to be adjectival. . . . Emma is called a "comic novel". Then we mean that Emma is by kind a novel, by mode comic.³¹

Mode derives from kind; it has, however, a "selection only of the corresponding kind's features, and one from which overall

³¹ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 106.

external structure is absent."³² Mode is a particularly useful generic concept because it can be used locally without compromising subgenre or kind.

The flexibility of Fowler's theory of kinds has been stressed throughout, and an important element in this respect is his approach to mixed genres. Frye also recognises their existence, but Fowler considers various ways in which genres may combine. In a hybrid genre elements of two genres co-exist without either dominating the other, but in the more common "modal transformation" the structure of the work is governed by one genre and other features derive from a second genre. Such combinations offer further possibilities of interpretation in which the sum of the generic elements is likely to be greater than the parts.

The present description can only give the barest summary of Fowler's theory, a theory that combines precision of terminology with flexibility towards genres and generic mixture. Without confining literary works to categories in a strict classificatory system, it allows the use of genre as an interpretative tool.

The theory of genres expounded in Alastair Fowler's Kinds of Literature underlies the present examination of T.H. White's Arthurian books. Without attempting to apply the theory in detail, I shall use the broad concepts of kind,

³² Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 107.

subgenre, and mode used by Fowler. This approach makes possible an interpretation of White's Arthurian books which, by examining the generic diversity of the work, will reveal its unique quality.

Fowler's approach is particularly useful in a study of T.H. White's Arthurian books because, as Chapman's article shows, they have been the subject of generic misunderstanding in the past. Misreadings arise when critics attempt to fit the whole of The Once and Future King into a single generic pattern. It is also a mistake, however, to treat each of the four constituent books as belonging to a different genre. The fourfold structure of The Once and Future King allows White to use generic mixtures more freely than would a single long book, although the sequence "Poetry-Farce-Romance-Tragedy" that White himself envisaged³³ is an over-simplification. It does suggest, however, that White was aware of the possibilities of generic variation which this form allows. This study will not, therefore, attempt to assign each constituent book to a different genre or search for the dominant genre in The Once and Future King as a whole. It will instead examine the way that various prose genres operate within White's books to create contrasts without incongruity. The unity of The Once and Future King as a whole is fundamental to the success of the generic mixture and that unity must be established before the various genres are examined.

³³ White, letter to L.J. Potts dated 28th June, 1939, Letters to a Friend, p. 99.

Chapter Three

The Unity of White's Arthurian Books

The first three books of The Once and Future King were originally published as separate volumes, and The Sword in the Stone is still available as such, as is The Book of Merlyn. White always intended that the work be published as an omnibus volume,¹ although the publication of The Sword in the Stone, The Witch in the Wood and The Ill-Made Knight suggests that White, and his publisher, Collins, regarded them as distinct works capable of standing alone. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the unity of the work and to consider briefly its implications for the genre of The Once and Future King. White revised the original versions of the first three books before they were published as The Once and Future King and some of the changes made affect both the unity of the work as a whole and the ability of the books to stand alone.

The question of The Once and Future King's unity may appear to parallel the discussion about the unity of Le Morte Darthur which followed Vinaver's assertion that Malory's work

¹ "I want eventually to publish all 4 books in one volume" letter to L.J. Potts dated 28th June 1939, Letters to a Friend, p. 98.

is not a unified whole but eight separate tales. This controversy is not, however, relevant to White's use of Malory since he had finished writing his Arthurian books before Vinaver's edition, The Works of Sir Thomas Malory,² was published in 1947. When L.J. Potts drew White's attention to the new edition and its editor's theory³ White responded thus:

I don't think it's much good my worrying more about Mallory's sources or manuscripts. I've done too much of it already, for a 'creative artist'. I knew quite a lot about his habit of tacking sources together without caring whether they fitted (that's why there were so many different people with the same name -- Elaines etc.) and I'd rather not know any more, or I shall become a 'critic' instead of a 'creative artist' as above.⁴

The question of unity in Le Morte Darthur did not greatly concern White; he did own a copy of Vinaver's edition,⁵ but Kurth Sprague noted that its pages were uncut.⁶ I shall not, therefore, address the question of the unity of Le Morte Darthur but will treat it as being, as it was usually felt to be before Vinaver's edition appeared, a single unified work. Saintsbury, for example, regarded Malory as the architect of a unified Arthurian romance: "It appears, indeed, to have

² Eugène Vinaver, ed. The Works of Sir Thomas Malory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947).

³ Letter from L.J. Potts to White dated 13th June 1947, Letters to a Friend, p. 196.

⁴ Letter from White to L.J. Potts dated 20th June 1947, Letters to a Friend, p.200.

⁵ I am indebted to Cathy Henderson of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin for the information.

⁶ Sprague, p.104-5.

been left for Malory to adjust and bring out the full epic completeness of the legend."⁷

The Sword in the Stone is the only one of White's originally published Arthurian books still available as a separate volume. This is due to its continued popularity as a children's book. The differences between the original version and that included in The Once and Future King are considerable; they consist both of minor changes to words, spelling and punctuation, and of the removal and replacement of whole chapters. In "The Sword in the Stone," Madame Mim, the Anthropophagi, T. natrix, the visit to Athene and the raid on Galapas's castle are all omitted and replaced by the ants and the wild geese, which were originally part of The Book of Merlyn. The diversity of the original version of The Sword in the Stone is reduced and the two new episodes focus attention on the theme of Might which is so important in the later books. Some of the wide range of Merlyn's educational project is lost as a result, but the Wart still has his visit to the pike, the hawks, Robin Wood and Morgan le Fay, the joust between King Pellinore and Sir Grummore, and the visit to the badger.

The revisions result in a change of tone between the two versions. Nothing in The Sword in the Stone is as unpleasant

⁷ George Saintsbury, The Flourishing of Romance and the Rise of Allegory (London: Blackwood, 1897), p. 127. See also Vida D. Scudder, Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory: A Study of the Book and Its Sources (London: Dent, 1921), pp. 182-5.

or pessimistic as the Wart's excursion among the ants. Madame Mim is threatening; she represents the dark side of the magic practised by Merlyn, but she is defeated by Merlyn's superior cunning:

The ingenious magician had turned himself successively into the microbes, not yet discovered, of hiccoughs, scarlet fever, mumps, whooping cough, measles and heat spots, and from a complication of all these complaints the infamous Madame Mim had immediately expired. (The Sword in the Stone, p. 96)

Galapas similarly abuses the power which his stature as a giant gives him. He keeps his gardeners in chains and imprisons people, including King Pellinore, for no good reason; he is White's portrait of a fascist dictator. Madame Mim and Galapas are individuals who misuse power but the threat that they present is mitigated by comedy. They are replaced by the ants who exemplify a collective evil; the impulse which causes whole nations to go to war, rather than that which leads one individual to oppress another.

The omission of some benign characters also changes the tone. The dreams of T. natrix and Athene are both concerned with the inter-relationships of all life on earth. To illustrate the essentially destructive nature of mankind, T. natrix tells the story of his peaceful ancestor Atlantosaurus who was killed by H. sapiens georgius sanctus, a creature so divorced from his environment that he was unable to distinguish the harmless dinosaur from the dangerous one. Athene's dream of the geological history of the the earth makes a similar point and ends thus:

In the ultimate twinkling of an eye, far tinier in time than the last millimetre on a six-foot rule, there came a man. He split up the one pebble which remained of all that mountain with blows; then made an arrowhead of it, and slew his brother.

(The Sword in the Stone, p. 272)

Men, according to the experiences of T. natrix and Athene, destroy the environment, its other inhabitants and their own species. The geese episode, which replaces these two episodes, does not draw attention to man's pernicious effect on the environment, but shows a peaceful example of co-operation and co-existence, both among the geese and with the rest of the natural world. Man's alienation from the planet is a major theme in The Sword in the Stone, but in the revised version it is far less important. Only a comment made by the badger at the end of the book questions man's relationship to the biosphere:

If even Sir Ector was to go for a walk beside a river, not only would the birds fly from him and the beasts run away from him, but the very fish would dart to the other side. They don't do this for each other. (p.196)

The battle with the anthropophagi is replaced by the rescue of Friar Tuck, Wat, the Dog Boy and Cavall from Morgan le Fay's Castle Chariot, although both versions have the framework of a visit to Robin Wood. The introduction of Morgan le Fay links "The Sword in the Stone" more closely with Arthurian material and also presents the theme of racial history. White uses the complex racial history of the British Isles to explain, in part, the hostility which Cornwall

sisters and their husbands exhibit towards Arthur. The people of Lothian and Cornwall were Celts, dispossessed by the Saxons who were in turn dispossessed by the Normans, represented by Arthur. He therefore becomes the focus for generations of resentment at a series of alien occupations. The Cornwall sisters are descended from the pre-Celtic people who have been driven underground and are perceived by the later arrivals as fairies. Various strata of the racial mix are present in this chapter: Morgan is pre-Celtic, Robin Wood is a Saxon, and Arthur and Kay are Norman. The bitterness felt by the Old Ones is an active malice which imprisons harmless people like Wat and the Dog Boy. When the problem of Celtic nationalism asserts itself again in the Gaelic Wars in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" the ground has already been prepared by this chapter.

The major revisions to "The Sword in the Stone" focus attention on alternative systems of organisation within a single species, a point emphasised by the badger when he asks the Wart "Which did you like best . . . the ants or the wild geese?" (p. 197). Structurally, however, the revisions of content have little effect because the structure of "The Sword in the Stone" lends itself well to revision. The book is essentially episodic and the main plot does not progress by means of one action leading to another. The beginning of the book has a causal plot: the lack of a governess leads Sir Ector to consider the educational alternatives open for the boys, but at the time it is hay-making and they were "excused

from being eddicated just then" (p. 5); a thunderstorm ends the hay-making so the boys take out Cully, who gets lost. In searching for the hawk the Wart discovers Merlyn, who comes home with him as tutor. The next seventeen chapters contain the various episodes of the Wart's education, until, in the final three chapters, another causal plot appears, in the story from Malory of Arthur's finding the sword in the stone. Much the largest part of "The Sword in the Stone" is therefore episodic.

In the absence of a causal plot, interest is maintained in various ways. Mystery is one important element; the Wart's true identity is not confirmed until the final line of the book, although a hint is given at the beginning, "the Wart was called the Wart because it more or less rhymed with Art, which was short for his real name" (p. 3), and of course, the title of the book is also significant. Nevertheless, the truth, and the purpose of Merlyn's "special tuition," is not confirmed until the end of the book.

The scheme of education carried out by Merlyn also plays a part in sustaining interest. Although the Wart's visit to the hawks is not a consequence of his swim in the moat, and not, therefore, part of a causal plot, the reader is, nevertheless, interested to discover what is the next stage in this eccentric plan. The structure of "The Sword in the Stone" could have a cumulative effect if the Wart could be shown to change and develop as a result of his various

experiences. However, he appears to do little more than absorb and enjoy them, they do not change his fundamental character and he has no idea why he is singled out for special tuition. He says:

Even if I have had the best of it for some mysterious reason, up to the present time -- in our education -- now I must pay for my past pleasures and for seeing all those delightful dragons, witches, fishes, cameleopards, pismires, wild geese and such like, by being a second-rate squire and holding Kay's extra spears for him, while he hoves by some well or other and jousts with all comers. Never mind, I have had a good time while it lasted.
(p. 181)

White emphasises that the Wart's character is unchanged by his experiences: "The Wart continued to be stupid, fond of Kay, and interested in birds" (p. 181). Continuity of character is an important feature in "The Sword in the Stone" and The Once and Future King as a whole, and the failure of the Wart's childhood experience to alter what White calls his "stupidity," his fondness for Kay and his interest in birds shows how deep rooted these characteristics are and will remain.

In "The Sword in the Stone" the Wart is at the centre of the book because all the strange experiences, such as a fish's-eye view of the universe, are presented from his point of view. The apparent blandness of his character casts doubt on his suitability for the role of king which is thrust on him at the end of the book. The Wart has been brought up by his foster-family to take second place, and by Merlyn as an excellent naturalist. It is an unusual training for a king.

Unity in "The Sword in the Stone" is achieved by means of various elements, such as consistency of character, the theme of education, and the localised setting. The earlier version has a greater range of episodes and is concerned with the place of mankind on the planet as a whole, but it is perhaps too loosely structured in the central section. The revisions remedy the slackness by reducing the number of episodes and avoiding the near repetition of the T. natrix and Athene chapters. "The Sword in the Stone" in its revised form also introduces themes which are important to The Once and Future King and thus supports the unity of the book as a whole, but in doing so the broader ecological theme of The Sword in the Stone is sacrificed.

Unlike the single and isolated setting of "The Sword in the Stone," in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" the action alternates between Lothian and the English court and this contrast forms the basic structure of the book. The Gawaine clan, in the primitive context of their remote home, reveal that their collective qualities, both good and bad, stem from their environment and culture. The boys' cruelty is amoral. For example, they find two donkeys and beat them:

The idea which the children had was to hurt the donkeys. Nobody had told them it was cruel to hurt them, but then, nobody had told the donkeys either. On the rim of the world they knew too much about cruelty to be surprised by it. So the small circus was a unity -- the beasts reluctant to move and the children vigorous to move them, the two parties bound together by the link of pain to which they both agreed without question. The pain itself was so much a matter of course that it had vanished out of the picture, as if by a process of cancellation.

The animals did not seem to be suffering, and the children did not seem to be enjoying the suffering.
(p. 247)

White describes this as an "Eden-like scene" (p. 247), suggesting that the children have no awareness of good and evil, a situation for which their mother is responsible:

She had brought them up -- perhaps through indifference or through laziness or even through some kind of possessive cruelty -- with an imperfect sense of right and wrong. It was as if they could never know when they were being good or when they were being bad.
(p. 217)

Morgause makes no attempt to give her children any kind of moral values. Unlike the Wart's and Kay's, and Lancelot's, their education is not planned and they must take advantage of whatever opportunity presents itself. They turn for guidance to St. Toirdealbhach, a rather dubious saint, who does not provide religious instruction, but, with very little persuasion, tells them stories of the old Irish kings such as Conor Mac Nessa, which are more to the boys' taste:

"Is it a moral tale yer after?"

"No, no. No morals. We like a story about fighting. Come, St. Toirdealbhach, what about the time you broke the Bishop's head?"

The saint drank a big gulp of his white whisky and spat in the fire.

"There was a king in it one time," said he.

(p. 243)

Lothian is a place far removed in culture from the English court, or even from the Forest Sauvage; it belongs to an earlier age of clan warfare, cattle raids, and a bleak struggle for survival. The experience of the Orkney children contrasts with that of Kay and the Wart, who live in a

provincial rather than remote castle and who are surrounded by people concerned for their welfare. The Orkney clan live in a much more geographically isolated place, "the rim of the world" (p.247), among people who seem indifferent to the children.

The alternating scene in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" is, however, a unifying feature of the book because the English scenes are concerned primarily with the preparations for a war in which Arthur's opponent is Lot of Orkney. The English scenes also show the development of Arthur's theory that Might is not Right. In the course of discussions with Kay and Merlyn, Arthur reaches the conclusion that Might should be used for good and develops an idea to control Might which will eventually grow into the Round Table. The chapters set in Lothian reveal the childhood of the Orkney brothers, both as a background to their later appearance at court and in contrast to the childhood of Arthur and Kay. Furthermore it presents the two alternative civilisations which come into conflict at Bedegraine. The Gaelic Wars pick up the theme of racial history introduced in the Morgan le Fay episode of the revised "The Sword in the Stone."

In "The Queen of Air and Darkness" the English scenes tend to be descriptive and discursive until the Battle of Bedegraine. Arthur's character is shown developing through thought and discussion rather than through action. At the beginning of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" he is immature

both as a man and a king, still very much the same as the Wart who pulled the sword from the stone:

Arthur was a young man, just on the threshold of life. He had fair hair and a stupid face, or at any rate there was a lack of cunning in it. It was an open face, with kind eyes and a reliable or faithful expression, as though he were a good learner who enjoyed being alive and did not believe in original sin. (p. 225)

In the course of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" Merlyn leads Arthur to the conclusion that war is always bad but may have to be fought to destroy a worse evil. Arthur, although he is now king, is still a "good learner" and is guided by Merlyn to reach this conclusion. Arthur's education is not really complete until he has learned to use Might for Right in practice, and has destroyed the feudal concept of war for ransom. The relationship between Arthur and Merlyn is fundamentally unchanged: the King still looks to his tutor for guidance, which the magician gives as far as is consistent with his policy of making the young man think for himself. It is Merlyn rather than Arthur who stresses the new King's status and power; Arthur asks what would happen if he dropped a stone from the battlements on to a servant and the conversation continues:

"At thirty-two feet per second," he said, "I think it would kill him dead. Four hundred g is enough to shatter the skull."

"I have never killed anybody like that," said the boy, in an inquisitive tone.

Merlyn was watching.

"You are the King," he said.

Then he added, "Nobody can say anything to you if you try." (p. 230)

Merlyn's respect for majesty can be dictatorial. For example:

The King of England painfully climbed the two hundred and eight steps which led to Merlyn's tower room, and knocked on the door. The magician was inside, with Archimedes sitting on the back of his chair, busily trying to find the square root of minus one. He had forgotten how to do it.

"Merlyn," said the King, panting, "I want to talk to you."

He closed his book with a bang, leaped to his feet, seized his wand of lignum vitae, and rushed at Arthur as if he were trying to shoo away a stray chicken.

"Go away!" he shouted. "What are you doing here? What do you mean by it? Aren't you the King of England? Go away and send for me! Get out of my room! I never heard of such a thing! Go away at once and send for me!"

"But I am here."

"No, you're not," retorted the old man resourcefully. And he pushed the King out of the door, slamming it in his face. (p. 251-2)

Arthur has grown up to be so modest and unselfconscious that he has to be forced to recognize the limitations placed on his behaviour by his status. Merlyn is aware that unless Arthur begins to behave like a king, even with those closest to him, he will not be acknowledged as such by people like Lot. In "The Sword in the Stone", Merlyn's educational plan develops Arthur's natural qualities of affection and justice, but he still needs guidance to bring these qualities to bear on his kingship. By the end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" Arthur has matured into a true king: "He had been fighting, on and off, ever since he had come to be King by drawing the sword out of the stone, and the anxiety of these campaigns had grown him into a splendid fellow" (p. 322).

The character of Morgause caused White great difficulty

and the many revisions of The Witch in the Wood were concerned mainly with this problem. It was a constant subject in White's correspondence with L.J. Potts between June 1939 and January 1941.⁹ The Witch in the Wood was published first in America in 1939, but was revised many times before inclusion in The Once and Future King as "The Queen of Air and Darkness". The revisions were on a much larger scale than those which White made to The Sword in the Stone, and a detailed examination of the revisions is beyond the scope of the present discussion. The problem seems to have been that White based the character on his mother, Constance White, and his feelings about her came to dominate the character, he wrote: "I hate Morgause so much that I cant write about her."⁹ Kurth Sprague has explored in detail White's attitude to Morgause with reference both to White's own journal and Constance White's memoirs.¹⁰ The overall effect of the revisions to The Witch in the Wood is to make the book much shorter and more compact by cutting out material about Lothian. This creates a much better balance between Lothian and England and prevents Morgause from dominating the book. In "The Queen of Air and Darkness" Morgause is portrayed less directly and without the slapstick of The Witch in the Wood; her character is revealed by the effect she has on her sons, on the English knights, and by what Merlyn tells Arthur about her: "Queen Morgause wears the trousers" (p. 234).

⁹ See Gallix, ed., Letters to a Friend, pp. 98-122.

⁹ Letter to L. J. Potts dated 6th December 1940, Letters to a Friend, p. 118.

¹⁰ Sprague, pp. 221-3.

Morgause's appearances in the book are few, but she is the focus of attention for three groups of characters. Although her supernatural abilities are limited, "She was not a serious witch like her sister Morgan le Fay" (p. 221), Morgause is not a comic witch either, like Madame Mim; she is the most serious threat that Arthur faces. The double setting of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" is unified by the battle between the two cultures. Arthur's success at Bedegraine establishes him as undisputed king and emphasises his role as hero of The Once and Future King as a whole.

"The Ill-Made Knight" derives much more directly from Malory than the previous two books. White selected material about Lancelot from Le Morte Darthur carefully, to compress Malory's extensive story into a much more compact version of the knight's life. Much of the story given by Malory is altered or excluded, for example, Lancelot's adventure in the Chapel Perilous (VI, 14-15; Spisak pp. 151-4). The greatest change made by White is in the combination of Elaine the mother of Galahad, and Elaine of Astolat into a single character. The selection of material and changes made to the story enable White to present a more closely structured account of the life of Lancelot. "The Ill-Made Knight" probably has the greatest unity of any of the five books, concentrating as it does on the life of a single character whose conflicting loyalties to God, his king, and his love exemplify the conflicts inherent in the literary vision of the

feudal system.' ' White shows Lancelot's growth to physical, military, and spiritual maturity, the last being the most difficult to achieve and sustain. Lancelot, his human and spiritual loves, is clearly the unifying feature of "The Ill-Made Knight", but the book is also a unified part of The Once and Future King. Once more, Arthur's character, in his mature phase as a powerful king, links this book to the work as a whole.

"The Ill-Made Knight" is Lancelot's book and as in some other versions of the Arthurian stories such as the romances of Chrétien de Troyes or Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Arthur plays a relatively small part in it. Arthur's importance is, however, greater than ever because he provides the initial motive for Lancelot's pursuit of excellence. White introduces Lancelot in a characteristic fashion, in the process of his education as a knight. The Wart was introduced in the midst of his varied education, and the Gawaine brothers in telling stories about vengeance, but Lancelot is engaged in knightly exercise. The purpose of this exercise is to become worthy of Arthur and his ideal:

Lancelot, swinging his dumb-bells fiercely and making his wordless noise, had been thinking of King Arthur with all his might. He was in love with him. That was why he had been swinging the poises.

(p. 327)

' ' Charles Moorman, A Knight There Was: The Evolution of the Knight in Literature (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967).

Lancelot's commitment to Arthur's plan to control Might is illustrated by the severe regime of training to which he is subjected by Uncle Dap: "Three years may seem a long time for a boy to spend in one room, if he only goes out of it to eat and sleep and to practise tilting in the field" (p. 332). Lancelot's devotion is rewarded, not only by a physical superiority to every other knight he ever encounters, but by Arthur's personal and lasting friendship. The essential features of Arthur's character, his modesty and openness, do not deviate from the pattern set in the first two books. His reaction to Lancelot's knocking him off his horse in a joust sets the tone of his attitude:

Generally, when one knight had given another a fall with the lance, the fallen one used to lose his temper, blame the fall on his horse, and insist upon fighting it out with swords on foot. The usual excuse was to say: "The son of a mare hath failed me, but I wote well my father's sword never shall."

The black knight [Arthur], however, did not do the usual thing. He was evidently a more cheerful kind of person than the colour of his armour would suggest, for he sat up and blew through the split in his helm, making a note of surprise and admiration.

(pp. 343-4)

Furthermore, during Lancelot's first evening in Camelot, Arthur is completely open about the achievements of the Round Table and the problems which it faces. A relationship of complete trust on military and political matters is immediately established between the two men. Such trust cannot extend to openness about Lancelot's relationship with Guenever. Arthur's attitude to the situation is still consistent with his character in the earlier books. There White often used the word stupid to describe Arthur, but it is

not stupidity, however, which governs Arthur's response to the situation. He is explicitly stated to be one of "the first two people to notice that Lancelot and Guenever were falling in love with each other" (p. 349), and his initial reaction is to remove Lancelot from the court and take him to the Roman War. Arthur's political maturity dictates that he cannot admit that he has been betrayed by the two key figures in his court. The consequence of such an admission, the loss of Lancelot, would endanger the Round Table itself. Furthermore, Arthur's relationship with Kay has already shown that he has a capacity to love people who do not, perhaps, deserve his love. The result of Arthur's attitude is to make Lancelot even more committed to the ideals of the Round Table because he knows himself to be disloyal to his king.

"The Ill-Made Knight," then, is Lancelot's book, but his commitment to Arthur, both personal and military, keeps the King's character and ideals at the centre of the book, even when he is not involved in the action. Lancelot's attachment to Arthur is more than a conventional feudal loyalty. They make an effort to preserve their friendship despite their public court lives, for example: "Arthur and Lancelot were at the nine-pin alley. They had got into the habit of going off to this unfashionable spot every day to cheer themselves with a little conversation" (p. 525). Arthur and his ideals give Lancelot a perfect vehicle for the full use of his talents as a fighter and his spiritual need to use his skills for the benefit rather than the oppression of humanity. The

combination of Arthur and Lancelot allows each to achieve much more than either could alone, and the friendship between the two men illustrates the unity of "The Ill-Made Knight" with The Once and Future King. Arthur and his ideals are a constant theme throughout The Once and Future King, and Lancelot personifies those ideals.

"The Candle in the Wind" is the only one of the books of The Once and Future King not to have been published as a separate volume, and this suggests that it is less likely to be able to stand alone than any of the others. It was not originally written in its present form, but began life as a play.¹² The final part of Arthur's story is, perhaps, the most obviously dramatic. Mordred and Agravaire initiate a course of action which results in the destruction of Arthur's civilisation; one event leading to another until the final catastrophe. Sylvia Townsend Warner's comments on the play, however, suggest that White was no dramatist:

Not only are the speeches long; they are lifeless. Past events are related in order to give the action a shove on; coming events are summarized beforehand. When the dialogue escapes from speeches it is affectedly simple: Arthur, dragging his doom after him, seems to have come in for a cup of tea after tinkering unsuccessfully with the lawn-mower.¹³

"The Candle in the Wind" does not share these faults, but the skeleton of drama still shows through in the predominance of dialogue over narrative in the book. The book as a part of The Once and Future King has one advantage over any similar

¹² Warner, p. 175.

¹³ Warner, p. 175.

play, in that White was able to build on characters already established in the earlier books, for example Gawaine and his attitude to his family.

A legacy from the play and part of White's debt to Malory is the tightly controlled plot of "The Candle in the Wind". In the episodic plot of "The Sword in the Stone" or the alternating plot of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" many incidents do not advance the story but build up character or background. In a similar way the plot of "The Ill-Made Knight" reveals Lancelot's character and builds up his reputation. In "The Candle in the Wind", however, the pieces are all in place; the characters are established and they perform their roles in the story very much as they do in Malory. The plot of "The Candle in the Wind" is the strongest of the four books in conventional terms, but it relies too heavily on elements established in the earlier books to stand alone successfully.

The constant element linking "The Candle in the Wind" with the first three books is Arthur's character. White allows Arthur to retain the qualities of modesty and unselfconsciousness which he had as a child and a young man, but nevertheless gives him the dignity appropriate to an old king. In Chapter IV of "The Candle in the Wind," as Lancelot and Guenever discuss their relationship, Arthur comes into the room:

He had stopped in the curtained doorway, his pale hand with the royal signet gleaming in the darkness as it held the tapestry aside -- and then, without eavesdropping for a moment, he had let the tapestry fall and disappeared. He had gone to find a page to announce him. (p. 574)

His reluctance to surprise his best friend and his wife indicates Arthur's sensitivity to their feelings but also his awareness of the dignity due to his position. As an old king, Arthur is recognizably the same character as the boy who asked Merlyn for a special adventure for Kay but who "knew that if he told the elder boy about his conversation with Merlyn, Kay would refuse to be condescended to, and would not come" (p. 90). He will not embarrass and hurt the people he loves, nor will he allow his office to be compromised by even a semi-public recognition of their adultery.

Arthur's sensitivity to the feelings of others is unchanged, but he has had to learn to behave with the dignity and control necessary to a king. There has been a change from the young man who enjoyed using Excalibur in the first Gaelic War (p. 225) to the old king who in Chapter V of "The Candle in the Wind" agrees to the plans of his son and nephew to trap his wife and his best friend together in order to prove their guilt (p. 589-91). Arthur has lost his exuberance and has gained an ability to apply his own justice impartially, even if it means the death of his wife. His judgement is fine enough to enable him to refuse to leave the castle on purpose to help Mordred and Agravaire (p. 591), but not to change his plans in order to thwart them. Arthur does not make a special

case for his wife and best friend but he is still strong enough not to be swayed by Mordred and Agravaine and to hope that they will fail. He says:

But if I may speak for a moment, Mordred and Agravaine, as a private person, the only hope I now have left is that Lancelot will kill you both and all the witnesses -- a feat which, I am proud to say, has never been beyond my Lancelot's power. And I may add this also, as a minister of Justice, that if you fail for one moment in establishing this monstrous accusation, I shall pursue you both remorselessly, with all the rigour of the laws which you yourselves have set in motion. (p. 591)

In the final chapter of "The Candle in the Wind," which was written to take the place of the abandoned Book of Merlyn, Arthur thinks over his attempts to conquer Might and tries to work out why he has failed. White attempted in this chapter to fulfil some of the functions he had planned for The Book of Merlyn; to consider why mankind is so prone to violence and to emphasize that Arthur has never given up thinking about the problem. As a thinker, Arthur is converted once again into Merlyn's pupil, although not overtly as in The Book of Merlyn. The King "had always been a dutiful thinker, never an inspired one" (p. 667) and is still Merlyn's "stupid" pupil who had to be coached in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" to reach the conclusion that Might is not Right and that he was in a position to do something about it. The theme of childhood as the hope of the world even appears again at the end of the book when young Tom Malory the page promises to be "a kind of vessel to carry on the idea" (p. 674) and to tell the story to future generations. Even on the night before his

death Arthur remains essentially the same sensitive and optimistic character that he was as a boy. The continuity of Arthur's character is the single most important unifying factor in The Once and Future King.

The Book of Merlyn was not included in the final version of The Once and Future King, although parts of it were incorporated into "The Sword in the Stone". Nevertheless it was conceived as the conclusion to the whole work which would turn the "completed epic into a perfect fruit 'rounded off and bright and done.'" ¹⁴ The Book of Merlyn returns Arthur to the animals, emphasizing the continuity of character from "The Sword in the Stone" and the importance of the lessons Arthur learned as a boy. The setting of the book in the Combination Room of the badger's sett recalls the story, not told in Malory, of Arthur sleeping underground until the time comes for his return. There are, however, considerable differences in tone between The Once and Future King and The Book of Merlyn.

Throughout The Once and Future King the pace of the action has gradually speeded up. The slow episodic movement of "The Sword in the Stone" was appropriate to childhood, which to a child seems endless. "The Queen of Air and Darkness" and "The Ill-Made Knight" show the gradual growth of the Round Table, first as an idea, then as a real force for good. Finally in "The Candle in the Wind" the plot gathers

¹⁴ White, in a letter to L.J. Potts dated 6th December, 1940, Letters to a Friend, p. 118.

momentum as it moves towards the destruction of civilisation. The Book of Merlyn in comparison is almost static. It is dominated by Merlyn's attacks on the human race, and its greatest fault is the change in Merlyn's character. In "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness" Merlyn taught Arthur to think for himself and gave him experiences to think about; on one occasion he said: "Stand up for yourself, that's the ticket. Asking advice is the fatal thing" (p. 227). In The Book of Merlyn Arthur does not ask for advice, but Merlyn gives it in good measure. He changes from the irascible but hopeful teacher of "The Sword in the Stone" into a peevish theoretician, angry with Arthur because he has not succeeded in changing human nature. Even the animals recognize his unpleasantness:

And they turned upon Merlyn crossly, saying: "Now look what you have done! This is the result of all your jibber and jabber! The poor king is perfectly miserable, and all because you throw your weight about, and exaggerate, and prattle like a poop!"
(The Book of Merlyn p. 39)

The change in Merlyn epitomizes the faults in The Book of Merlyn. Although he is still the means by which Arthur experiences the natural world at close quarters, he has become a windbag who wants to explain why it all went wrong even though it is too late now to put it right.

Sylvia Townsend Warner suggests that White "went astray in that stony desert of words and opinions because he lacked his former guide. In the final chapter Malory has

returned,"¹⁵ but this is too simple an explanation. In most of "The Sword in the Stone" Malory served only as an inspiration and did not provide the narrative, nor did he in the Orkney sections of "The Queen of Air and Darkness." It is surely wrong, therefore, to suggest that White was necessarily weak when he was not following Malory. The weakness in The Book of Merlyn is not that White abandons Malory as a narrative guide but that he abandons narrative altogether. The success of "The Sword in the Stone" was that the animals exemplified various ways of life, but in The Book of Merlyn they articulate and discuss them. Attributing such roles to the animals makes them mouthpieces for White's views and takes them out of their own "specialism", which according to Merlyn is a crime against nature: "a species must specialise in its own speciality" (The Book of Merlyn p. 117).

It is difficult, therefore, to discuss the narrative unity of The Book of Merlyn because it lacks narrative. The characters are consistent within the book, but not, apart from Arthur, with their earlier appearances. When Merlyn says that the badger talks "like a communist of the nineteen-twenties" (The Book of Merlyn p. 124), he is right, so much so that the badger hardly seems to be a badger at all. He is a very different character from the one who believed that the true ends of philosophy are "to dig, and love your home" (p. 191). Sylvia Townsend Warner thinks that "even the hedgehog talks

¹⁵ Sylvia Townsend Warner, "The Story of the Book," The Book of Merlyn, p. xx.

too much."¹⁶

Arthur shows aspects of his character, which although not inconsistent, have not been fully developed before. In the early part of the book he is defensive: "I suppose I had better go away and drown myself. I am cheeky, insignificant, ferocious, stupid and impolitic. It hardly seems to be worth our going on" (The Book of Merlyn p. 39). This aspect of his character has never appeared before because he has never been under attack in this way. By the end of the book the king has recovered his dignity and asks incisive questions of his advisers. On no earlier occasion has White shown Arthur in the act of governing his kingdom, so although this majestic dignity has not appeared before it is consistent with the character of a man who has been a successful king for so long.

The Book of Merlyn is undoubtedly an interesting book but it is almost entirely unsuccessful. It is flawed internally, and, taken with The Once and Future King, its faults show up even more clearly. As a conclusion to The Once and Future King it would have devalued Arthur's long and painful efforts to govern justly by ending the book with a fruitless academic discussion. The Book of Merlyn would have added nothing to the unity of The Once and Future King and its strongest elements, the ants and the wild geese, were incorporated into "The Sword in the Stone".

¹⁶ Warner, "The Story of the Book," The Book of Merlyn, p. xix.

T.H. White's five Arthurian books exhibit varying degrees of internal unity but the only one which is really capable of standing alone, outside The Once and Future King, is "The Sword in the Stone". The lack of reference to Malory is one reason for this independent quality. It has the least reliance on Le Morte Darthur for plot material and is not, therefore, as integrated into the story of Arthur and the Round Table. Arthur's character is the main unifying factor throughout the five books, but others are also present. Once Arthur has become king, White depends on Malory much more for his narrative, but selects and rearranges the material to a considerable extent. Kurth Sprague has made a detailed study of which material from Malory White uses.¹⁷ White's use of the familiar story obviously contributes to the unity of The Once and Future King as a whole, as do the frequent references to Malory as his authority. The bare outline of plot obviously comes from Le Morte Darthur but White feeds his interpretation of Malory's book into his own. "The central theme of Morte d'Arthur is to find an antidote for War"¹⁸ White wrote, but the search for the antidote is more fundamental to White's book than it is to Malory's. In The Once and Future King the central and unifying theme is the search for the antidote. The character of Arthur created in "The Sword in the Stone" and educated in the workings of Might in the natural world is sustained throughout all four books in his attempt to apply his knowledge to human society. Only

¹⁷ Sprague, pp. 103-19.

¹⁸ Letter to L.J. Potts, dated 6th December, 1940, Letters to a Friend, p. 117.

Arthur and the preoccupation planted in him by Merlyn run through all five books in this way. Other characters also serve to bind the last three books of The Once and Future King together. The fate of the Orkney brothers throughout the last three books and of Lancelot in the last two provide a unifying thread.

The Once and Future King is a fully unified work; it is not four independent books grouped together under a convenient title but is linked throughout by a variety of elements. It is therefore legitimate to consider the genre of The Once and Future King as a whole.

Chapter Four

Elements of the Novel in White's Arthurian Books

I Setting

The novel has dominated prose fiction since the eighteenth century, but its nature and status as a genre have been subject to much critical debate. I shall not attempt an exhaustive discussion of the generic repertoire of the novel, but will take its main features as historically given. The present chapter will consider the status of the novel as a distinct genre and the social setting of The Once and Future King and the following chapter will consider its narrative style and methods of characterization. The examination of White's Arthurian books will show that The Once and Future King is a novel in some ways but not in others.

First on the novel as a genre. Fowler argues that, although there are many problems associated with the term "novel," its long use in criticism makes it difficult to discard.¹ Frye, by contrast, rejects the "novel-centered view of prose fiction"² and identifies other kinds of prose

¹ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 120.

² Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 304.

fiction distinct from the novel. Yet a third view is taken by Malcolm Bradbury who argues that:

The novel is not a traditional literary genre, like tragedy or comedy, but a general, varied, categorically distinctive form like poetry and drama, yet a form which, though recognizable to the writer when he writes one and to readers when they read one, is far less definable than poetry and drama.³

Such varied opinions indicate that the very status of the novel as a coherent genre is a matter of debate.

Fowler's theory of genre identifies the novel as a kind of literature with a number of subgenres. This view preserves the distinctness of the various forms of the novel which exist, but acknowledges the essential links between them. The problem with Frye's view is that in arguing for a limitation of the meaning of the term "novel," and substituting other terms to fill the vacuum, he attempts to impose on prose fiction a rigid external order which does not acknowledge the variety and flexibility of the form. Bradbury, on the other hand, recognizes the novel's disorderly nature, but assumes that definition is therefore impossible and that the novel has no value as a generic concept. Even if, as Bradbury argues, it is impossible to define the novel as a genre, it is certainly possible to describe the main points of its generic repertoire. From these foundations it is then possible to describe a subgenre by adding to the basic

³ Malcolm Bradbury, Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 278-9.

description of kind the features particular to one subgenre rather than another. This plan provides a way through "one of the moister areas of literature - irrigated by a hundred rills and occasionally degenerating into a swamp."⁴

At the most basic level it is generally accepted that the novel is an extended prose fiction. It is possible, however, to dispute even this. On the question of length, for example, "extended" is rather a vague term. E.M. Forster sought to be more precise and wrote that a novel should be over 50,000 words.⁵ There are works, admittedly written after Forster suggested this limit, which are generally recognized as novels, but which undercut it considerably, for example, Muriel Spark's The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and Not To Disturb.⁶ Length is plainly a generic feature of the novel, but it seems impossible to say exactly how long a novel should be. This is partly because length is a matter of scope rather than the number of words; a novel has a degree of openness and multiplicity of plot, character, and setting which would not be found in a short story.

That a novel should always be in prose is harder to question. Verse novels are a rarity and their deliberate rejection of the usual form confirms the importance of prose

⁴ E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel and Related Writings The Abinger Edition Vol. 12 (1927, rpt; London: Edward Arnold, 1974), p. 2.

⁵ Forster, p. 2.

⁶ Muriel Spark, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (London: Macmillan, 1961) and Not To Disturb (London: Macmillan, 1971).

as a feature of the novel.⁷ The fictional quality of the novel can also be questioned, but will ultimately assert itself. If events which actually happened are represented in a novel they become a part of the fiction in a similar way to that in which a real place becomes part of a fiction. In The Mandelbaum Gate,⁸ for example, the Eichmann trial forms a background to Barbara Vaughan's experiences in Jerusalem. The use of an event in recent history, particularly one which was the focus of so much emotion, fixes the action very precisely in time, and places the characters and their experiences in an historical context. The novel does not, however, give an historical account of the trial. Its inclusion in a novel involves the creation of a response by fictional character to a real event. The question of historical events represented in fiction becomes more complex in the context of the historical novel, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

The description of a novel as an extended prose fiction, broad as it is, must be accepted with the reservation that any of these three characteristics can be modified, and in extreme cases rejected. A complete rejection would, however, be an act of generic subversion. Such subversion is possible only because most readers accept that the basic

⁷ A recent example of a verse novel is Vickram Seth's The Golden Gate (London: Faber, 1986). In a review Alan Hollinghurst commented that "the form has prevented the subtlety, the economic naturalness of prose narrative," TLS 4th July 1986, p. 733.

⁸ Muriel Spark, The Mandelbaum Gate (London: Macmillan, 1965)

generic form exists. In genre, as elsewhere, it is the exception that proves the rule. However, the establishment of the novel as an extended prose fiction, is only a start. Before The Once and Future King can be discussed as a novel we must consider the main features of the novel at the time when White was writing.

The main tradition of the English novel before White is broadly realistic. The strength of that tradition has been supported since then by commercial publishing and academic opinion. Leavis's "Great Tradition" is a central, if not exclusive, area of interest in academic teaching of the novel. This mainstream tradition is the dominant subgenre of the novel as a kind of literature, and the present chapter will discuss its special characteristics in addition to those it shares with other extended prose fictions.

During the nineteenth century the novel throughout Europe became progressively more dedicated to the realistic presentation of contemporary life. The novel in England influenced, and was influenced by, this development, but it would be misleading to identify the English novel entirely with the European Realist tradition. "Realism" and "realistic" are vital terms in the discussion of the novel, and their usage has extended considerably beyond a simple reference to the dominant tradition of the nineteenth century; some clarification of meaning is, therefore, desirable. Arnold Kettle defines realism and realistic as "'relevant to

real life' as opposed to 'romance' and 'romantic', by which are indicated escapism, wishful thinking, unrealism."⁹ This definition is limited by its subjectivity. Kettle's "realism" is a label that he hangs on those fictions he values, reserving "romance" for those he finds superficial.

We need a better way of distinguishing between works which attempt to reveal the world as it exists, such as Middlemarch,¹⁰ those which are overtly fantastic, such as Gormenghast,¹¹ and the range of variations between them. A more precise definition needs to take account of different ways of representing experience. The aim of realism has been summarised thus:

'the task of the modern novel', Theodor Fontane once remarked, 'seems to me to be a description of a life, a society, a group of people, as the undistorted reflection of the life we lead.' And the word 'task' is highly significant here: it is an aspiration only sometimes to be achieved.¹²

The failure to achieve Fontane's aspiration is likely to be located in the attempt to create an "undistorted reflection." It can be argued that any writing, whether fiction or otherwise, is inevitably subject to distortion, because a verbal representation cannot exactly recreate a non-verbal

⁹ Arnold Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel (1951; rpt, London: Hutchinson, 1969), I, 26.

¹⁰ George Eliot, Middlemarch, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹¹ Mervyn Peake, Gormenghast (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1950).

¹² George Watson, The Story of the Novel (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 12.

experience. This is not to suggest that the task itself is pointless, but simply to acknowledge the limitations of realism.

Fowler makes limited use of the term realistic, preferring "verisimilar," and therefore avoids confusions which the variety of interpretations of realistic could cause. The common currency of realistic is, however, a reason for preferring it to the less familiar "verisimilar." "Realistic" is, therefore, used throughout this thesis to refer to the manner of presentation which attempts to show a reflection of characters, setting, and action, recognizable as belonging to the world as we know it to exist or to have existed.

The flexibility of the term "realism" is illustrated by the differing opinions of two critics about its decline. Bernard Bergonzi argues that:

A la recherche du temps perdu and *Ulysses* mark the apotheosis of the realistic novel, where the minute investigation of human behaviour in all its aspects -- physical, psychological and moral -- is taken as far as it can go, while remaining within the bounds of coherence.¹³

David Lodge, however, finds that the developments in the early twentieth-century novel bring "the writer out on the other side of 'realism'" and that:

pursuing reality out of the daylight world of empirical common sense into the individual's

¹³ Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 18.

consciousness, or subconscious, and ultimately the collective unconscious, discarding the traditional narrative structures of chronological succession and logical cause-and-effect, as being false to the essentially chaotic and problematic nature of subjective experience, the novelist finds himself relying more and more on literary strategies and devices that belong to poetry.¹⁴

Thus the same phenomenon is regarded as both the greatest achievement of realism and as breaking the boundaries of realism. The divergent views of Bergonzi and Lodge indicate the importance of the developments in the novel which took place early this century. The attempt to present an objective view of social relationships was abandoned in favour of a more subjective approach. In the modernist novel the action was usually presented through the consciousness of a character rather than a narrator, and the representation of interior reality became more important than the presentation of society according to the conventions of a relatively external realism. David Lodge argues that modernism did not completely replace the realist tradition, which survives, with modifications, to the present day and that not only do both traditions survive, but that they alternate in a regular pattern of dominance.¹⁵ The tradition of the novel in the twentieth century is varied, as might be expected from a kind of literature which encompasses so many subgenres.

¹⁴ David Lodge, Working With Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature (Boston & London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 6.

¹⁵ David Lodge, Working With Structuralism, p. 7.

The special characteristics of the mainstream novel are inevitably connected with the circumstances of its growth as an independent form. Ian Watt has shown that the novel developed in the context of the growth of individualism in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Bergonzi has argued, however, that the form is concerned with more than the experience of an individual:

in the European novel, character emerges when the unconditioned human organism is placed in a dialectical relationship with a social and moral order that, though intelligible, is complex, stratified and demanding.¹⁷

Throughout its history the mainstream realistic novel has always been concerned with the position of individuals and the social forces working upon them. Pamela, for example, is torn between adherence to the moral teaching of chastity instilled by her parents and the social pressure to obey her master.¹⁸ Elizabeth Bennett and Emma learn to curb their individuality and so win the approval of society in the form of a suitable husband.¹⁹ In the later nineteenth century, in a novel such as Middlemarch, the focus shifts slightly from an individual in society to the society itself. Many more examples could be given but these few show that society and

¹⁶ Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (1957; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

¹⁷ Bergonzi, pp. 41-42.

¹⁸ Samuel Richardson, Pamela, ed. Peter Sabor (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

¹⁹ Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice: The Novels of Jane Austen Vol. II, 3rd edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1932); Emma: The Novels of Jane Austen Vol. IV, 3rd. edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

social life are at the heart of the novel. The absence of a social setting can be as important a feature as the creation of a realistic society. In novels like The Lord of the Flies or Robinson,²⁰ for example, the characters behave as they do because the usual requirements and restraints of society are absent.

The presentation of society is part of the reason for the novel's extended size. Societies are composed of individuals, and even if the social milieu is taken for granted, as it is to some extent in the novels of Jane Austen, the positions of the various characters in relation to their immediate society are established so that they can function in the novel. Unless we know the circumstances and characters of Mrs. and Miss Bates, we can draw no conclusions from Emma's behaviour towards them. The social element in the novel concerns the way in which people behave towards each other and how their behaviour is governed by the expectations of society. The creation of a fictional society is a feature of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels and the range of scale of these portraits indicates the versatility of the novel; Middlemarch, for example, presents a society on a large scale, but the world of Silas Marner is much more circumscribed.²¹ It is clear that character and social setting are inextricably linked as distinguishing features of

²⁰ William Golding, Lord of the Flies (London: Faber and Faber, 1954) and Muriel Spark, Robinson (London: Macmillan, 1958).

²¹ George Eliot, Silas Marner, ed. Q.D. Leavis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).

the mainstream novel.

A third feature closely linked to character and setting is the role of the narrator. The development of narrative in the mainstream novel shows an increasing tendency towards impersonality, and a rejection of the implied relationship between author and narrator. Major novelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries strove to eliminate the intrusive narrator of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries:

The principles (though not invariably the practice) of Flaubert and James, of Conrad and Ford and Joyce, banished the obtrusive narrator, and stressed the ideal of the novel as a self-contained, self-sufficient work of art, whose creator would be conspicuously absent.²²

The concern of these novelists with the problem of narrative, and the subsequent interest of critics in this aspect of their work is indicative of the importance of narration as a feature of the mainstream novel.

The definition of the mainstream novel as a subgenre is elusive. In its widest sense, it is an extended prose fiction, broadly realistic in its narrative presentation of character and society. Walter Allen acknowledges the difficulty in defining the novel and quotes a description by Hazlitt, written, as Allen remarks, "before the greater part of the world's major novels had been written:"

²² Bergonzi, p. 190.

We find here a close imitation of man and manners; we see the very web and texture of society as it really exists, and as we meet it when we come into the world. If poetry has 'something more divine' in it, this savours more of humanity.²³

The three main features of the mainstream novel, social setting, narrative, and character, will be considered in relation to The Once and Future King, but it must be remembered that the absence of a generic feature can be as significant as its presence.

It has been established that social setting is a fundamental feature of the mainstream novel. I shall show, however, that White's Arthurian books lack the kind of social setting usually associated with the novel. Social and physical settings are closely linked. The physical settings of The Once and Future King and The Book of Merlyn will be considered first. I shall then examine the social setting and the integration of characters within it. There are three main physical settings in the books, the Castle of the Forest Sauvage, Lothian, and Arthur's court. The first two places are the backgrounds for childhood scenes and the third is the setting for the exercise of kingship.

"The Sword in the Stone" is set almost entirely in the Castle of the Forest Sauvage and in the forest surrounding it: only the last three chapters take place elsewhere. It has a more concretely realized social setting than any of the other

²³ Walter Allen, The English Novel (1954; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), p. 14.

books. In the mainstream novel a concretely realized physical setting provides a framework for the social context. In a novel set in the time in which it is written, details of buildings, clothes, and furniture perform a different function to that which they will perform in an historical novel. In The Ballad of Peckham Rye, for example, Dougal's room is described as a preliminary to the description of his reaction to it, and therefore as part of the development of his character, not because the room itself is in any way unusual.²⁴

In "The Sword in the Stone" White provides a great deal of information about life in the castle. Part of Chapter V (pp.36-9) for example, consists of a description of the architecture of the Castle and a discussion of medieval methods of dog training. The physical description does not create a static picture of a concentric castle, but builds a working model:

The stone part of the drawbridge with its barbican and the bartizans of the gatehouse are in good repair. These have many ingenious arrangements. Even if enemies got over the wooden bridge, which was pulled up so that they could not, there was a portcullis weighed with an enormous log which would squash them flat and pin them down as well. There was a large hidden trapdoor in the floor of the barbican, which would let them into the moat after all. At the other end of the barbican there was another portcullis, so that they could be trapped between the two and annihilated from above, while the bartizans, or hanging turrets, had holes in their floors through which the defenders could drop things on their heads. (p. 37)

²⁴ Muriel Spark, The Ballad of Peckham Rye (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 22-24.

The building is shown as a working piece of architecture, and the result is more vivid than a straightforward description of its appearance would have been. Beyond this initial description, however, little more is said about the building, and the Castle of the Forest Sauvage remains a vague place. Odd details are given, about the mews (pp. 8-9), the solar (pp. 135-6) and the kitchen (p. 182), but these are isolated. This is partly because only two of the Wart's adventures occur in the castle itself; the descriptions of the moat and the mews occur in the context of the boy's transformation into a fish and a hawk respectively. More adventures occur in the forest and therefore a physical description of the forest is as important as that of the castle. The forest, however, is not a background for a social setting and therefore its description is not relevant here, except in one particular respect. The forest forms an almost impenetrable barrier between the castle and the outside world, and its threatening nature is revealed when the Wart gets lost there:

There were magicians in the forest also in those legendary days, as well as strange animals not known to modern works of natural history. There were regular bands of Saxon outlaws -- not like Wat -- who lived together and wore green and shot with arrows which never missed. There were even a few dragons, though these were small ones, which lived under stones and could hiss like a kettle.

Added to this, there was the fact that it was getting dark. The forest was trackless and nobody in the village knew what was on the other side.

(p. 12-13)

The Forest Sauvage is a mysterious place in which dangerous powers hold sway, and more importantly it marks the limit of local geographical knowledge. Surrounded by such a barrier

the Castle of the Forest Sauvage is isolated and provincial.

The physical setting of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" alternates between Lothian and the English court, the locations of the two societies which come into conflict at Bedegraine. The Lothian sections concern mainly the childhood of Gawaine and his brothers, and to a lesser extent the adventures of King Pellinore, Sir Grummore, and Sir Palomides. The description of buildings in Lothian creates an impression of a strange and primitive place, for example, "Mother Morlan's house in the Out Isles was hardly bigger than a large dog kennel -- but it was comfortable and full of interesting things" (p. 242), and:

There was a circular room at the top of the tower, curiously uncomfortable. It was draughty. There was a closet on the east side which had a hole in the floor. This hole commanded the outer doors of the tower, of which there were two, and people could drop stones through it when they were besieged. Unfortunately the wind used to come up through the hole and go pouring out of the unglazed shot-windows or up the chimney -- unless it happened to be blowing the other way, in which case it went downward. It was like a wind tunnel. (p. 217)

These descriptions contrast with the descriptions of buildings in "The Sword in the Stone." Merlyn's house in the forest is "a snug cottage built of stone" (p. 22), and the Castle of the Forest Sauvage was:

a paradise for a boy to be in. The Wart ran about it like a rabbit in its own complicated labyrinth. He knew everything, everywhere, all the special smells, good climbs, soft lairs, secret hiding-places, jumps, slides, nooks, larders and blisses. (p. 38)

Architecture and the physical comfort dependent on it are much less advanced in Lothian than in the Forest Sauvage.

In Chapter II of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" the English court is stated to be Camelot and in Chapter VI Carlion. In Chapter II Arthur watches a man "with two buckets on a yoke, making his way across to the menagerie" (p. 224) which was a gift from the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of the City of London and was housed at the Tower (p. 212). Malory, however, locates the court in London immediately before the Battle of Bedegraine (I 10-11: Spisak, pp. 43-4). Although White probably knew that English medieval courts were itinerant, he never mentions the court moving from one place to another. He may therefore have intended the three names to signify a single place. Alternatively in giving three contradictory pieces of information about the court at a specific time White is implying that its existence is outside geographical reality. The locations of Lothian and the Forest Sauvage are vague, but at least they are static. The location of Arthur's court cannot be tied down to a specific place even within a mythical geography of Britain.

There is no wider social context in "The Ill-Made Knight" and "The Candle in the Wind." Each of these books, however, contains a chapter devoted to creating an impression of Arthur's England in its heyday. Chapter XXV of "The Ill-Made Knight" (pp. 442-7) and Chapter III of "The Candle in the Wind" (pp. 559-69) both present before-and-after images of

Arthur's kingdom, in which the situation before his reign is contrasted with that which his peace allows to develop. Chapter XXV of "The Ill-Made Knight" also has a structural function in the book: it creates a pause in the story which covers the fifteen years from Lancelot's recovery from madness to the beginning of the end of the Round Table. The early years of Arthur's rule "had been times of battle, in which those who insisted on living by the sword had been made to die by it" (p. 443), and details about those times are presented in a series of tableaux:

Wherever you went, during the first years, every vista had been terminated by a marching column of mercenaries, robbing and pilling from the Marches -- or by a knight of the new order exchanging buffets with a conservative baron whom he was trying to restrain from murdering serfs -- or by a golden-haired maiden being rescued out of some lofty keep by means of leather ladders -- or by Sir Bruce Saunce Pité riding a full wallop with Sir Lancelot coming deliverly after him. (p. 443)

The beginning of the passage draws the reader in as a viewer of the scene, for whom brief images are presented in succession. The style is economical and precise, including detail which allows the reader to focus very clearly on a single aspect of the description at a time, such as the leather ladders.

The chapter continues using the same technique to present Arthur's achievements in civilising the country: "now any virgin could circumambulate the whole country, even with gold and ornaments upon her person, without the least fear of harm" (p. 445). White's description of Arthur's England echoes

the accounts of chroniclers looking back to periods of peace under strong and just kings.²⁵ England under Arthur has changed from a brutalised society, in which survival was all, to one in which people can go about their business freely and cultivate higher interests. They can travel safely on pilgrimages, there is the opportunity for learning in the monasteries and universities, manners have improved, and culinary and other arts have developed. White selects striking and amusing detail, such as the banquet menu:

In the kitchens the famous cooks were preparing menus which included, for one course alone: ballock broth, caudle ferry, lampreys en galentine, oysters in civey, eels in sorré, baked trout, brawn in mustard, numbles of a hart, pigs farsed, cockintryce, goose in hoggepotte, venison in frumenty, hens in brewet, roast squirrels, haggis, capon-neck pudding, garbage, tripe, blaundersorye, caboges, buttered worts, apple mousse, gingerbread, fruit tart, blancmange, quinces in comfit, stilton cheese and causs boby. (p. 446)

This chapter supplies some of the wider social context lacking in "The Ill-Made Knight," but it does not provide the degree of social interest expected in a novel. Society, and, more important, the change in society is only a background to Lancelot's story, although he has been

²⁵ Cf. "Now in those days such is stated to have been the tranquility throughout Britain, which way so ever the rule of King Edwin had reached, that (as it is yet today in a common proverb), even if a woman should have wished to walk along with her newborn babe all over the island from sea to sea, she might have done so without injury from any." Baedae, Opera Historica trans. J.E. King (London: Heinemann, 1930), p. 299, and the account of the reign of Henry I in the Peterborough Chronicle: "God man he wes 7 micel æie wes of him: durste nan man misdōn wið oðer on his time. Pais he makede men 7 dær. Wua sua bare his byrthen gold 7 sylure, durste nan man sei to him naht bute god." The Peterborough Chronicle, ed. Cecily Clark, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 54.

instrumental in the change. The concentrated presentation of a social context in this chapter could be criticized for its failure to integrate society into the lives of the main characters, and for providing too much indigestible fact. However, this would be to misinterpret White's purpose. He presents the Middle Ages as a period in which life was lived to its limit, and the variety and intensity required for this vision is best achieved by a concentrated and detailed description such as that given in Chapter XXV.

In "The Candle in the Wind" Chapter III serves more than just the function of showing Arthur's achievement in creating a peaceful society. White celebrates the Middle Ages with a collection of facts to illustrate the variety of medieval culture and achievement, which he believes to be underrated. He objects to nineteenth-century attitudes to the period: "The Dark and Middle Ages! The Nineteenth Century had an impudent way with its labels" (p. 562). It would be wrong, however, to deduce from this attitude that White rejected all nineteenth-century values. He was in many ways a product of the nineteenth century; his Farewell Victoria is a lament for the passing of the age and in The Scandalmonger White argues that Queen Victoria was the last great product of his beloved eighteenth century.²⁶ White disliked only certain aspects of nineteenth-century culture, in particular the reverence for science and industrialisation. Medieval scientific

²⁶ White, Farewell Victoria (London: Collins, 1933) and The Scandalmonger (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), p. 208-19.

achievements are, the narrator claims, underrated by arrogant Victorians and their heirs:

And it is a mistake to believe that Arthur's civilisation was weak in this famous science of ours. The scientists, although they happened to call them magicians at the time, invented almost as terrible things as we have invented -- except that we have become accustomed to theirs by use. (p. 564)

White combines striking details about apparently unconnected subjects to create an impression of richness and variety. Within this chapter there appears a great range of historical and representative characters, crafts, skills, and customs which thrived during the "Age of Individuals" (p. 561). The individuals themselves are characterised with humour. An Archbishop of Canterbury, for example:

having excommunicated all the prebendaries of St. Paul's in a pet, rushed into the Priory of St. Bartholomew and knocked out the sub-prior in the middle of the chapel -- which created such an uproar that his own vestments were torn off, revealing a suit of armour underneath, and he had to flee to Lambeth in a boat. (p. 563)

or the "constipated papal nuncios" who had been forced to eat their bulls "parchment, ribbons, leaden seals and all" (p. 566). This chapter treads a very fine line between creating a vivid impression of medieval England and being a tedious catalogue of facts unconnected with the story, designed to display White's knowledge of the period.²⁷ It is only partly successful and the success is due to the humorous presentation of some of the facts and White's eye for the absurd, for

²⁷ Kurth Sprague has identified the sources of much of White's information about the Middle Ages; see Sprague, pp. 136-42.

example: "They had some sparkling names for their fiercer cocktails: which they called Huffle Cap, Mad Dog, Father Whoresonne, Angel's Food, Dragon's Milke, Go to the Wall, Stride Wide and Lift Leg" (p. 564-5). When White is able to carry his learning as lightly as this the chapter is entertaining and informative, but overall it is too long and contains too much fact not closely related to the plot.

In The Book of Merlyn the social setting is virtually non-existent: most of it takes place in the badger's sett among the animals. A consideration of how characters function in the context of human society is, therefore, impossible. One chapter, however, corresponds to the pattern of the overview or examination of the state of England which appears in the previous books. In Chapter 18 of The Book of Merlyn Arthur and the hedgehog climb a tor and look out over a sleeping England. The description of the countryside at night reflects Arthur's ambivalent feelings about his realm and his role as king. The Book of Merlyn is a flawed book, but this passage is among the best of White's work:

There is nothing so wonderful as to be out on a spring night in the country; but really in the latest part of the night, and, best of all, if you can be alone. Then, when you can hear the wild world scamper, and the cows chewing just before you tumble over them, and the leaves living secretly, and the nibblings and grass pluckings and the blood's tide in your own veins: when you can see the loom of the trees and hills in deeper darkness and the stars twirling in their oiled grooves for yourself: when there is one light in one cottage far away, marking a sickness or an early riser upon a mysterious errand: when the horse hoofs with squeaking cart behind plod to an unknown market, dragging their bundled man, in sacks, asleep: when the dogs' chains rattle at the farms, and the vixen

yelps once, and the owls have fallen silent: then is a grand time to be alive and vastly conscious, when all else human is unconscious, home-bound, bed-sprawled, at the mercy of the midnight mind.

(The Book of Merlyn p. 108)

The characteristic features of White's descriptive style are at work here. The reader is addressed in the second person and is thus drawn in to experience the description more directly. A variety of vivid detail is juxtaposed to reveal how much is happening in the middle of the night and anonymous characters are briefly presented, for example, an "early riser on a mysterious errand." This description, unlike the earlier ones, encompasses the whole of Arthur's kingdom: "stretched at his feet, she spread herself away into the remotest north, leaning towards the imagined Hebrides" (The Book of Merlyn p. 109). The breadth and vividness of this passage contrasts sharply with the enclosed setting of most of the rest of The Book of Merlyn inside the badger's sett.

The integration of characters with society is limited at the beginning of The Once and Future King and the lack of integration becomes more marked as the work progresses. There is a community in the Castle of the Forest Sauvage, but it is not central to "The Sword in the Stone". It is always described from the outside and functions as a background to the activities of the major characters rather than as a part of their lives. A closely knit community, it is drawn

together both by its isolation and its common concern in farming. Hay-making is a co-operative effort:

Sir Ector stood on the top of a rick, whence he could see what everybody was doing, and shouted commands all over the two-hundred-acre field, and grew purple in the face. The best mowers mowed away in a line where the grass was still uncut, their scythes roaring in the strong sunlight. The women raked the dry hay together in long strips with wooden rakes, and the two boys with pitchforks followed up on either side of the strip, turning the hay inwards so that it lay well for picking up.

(p. 6)

The organisation of hay-making reflects the social order of the castle: Sir Ector, as feudal lord, is literally as well as figuratively at the top, directing operations, the men perform the skilled work, the women have the less prestigious tasks, and the children, too, have an important rôle. It is a co-operative and a hierarchical society. Sir Ector has considerable power and when the storm breaks he "kept them at it till the great flashes were right overhead" (p. 7). His power is, however, used benevolently and he is never shown to do anything more tyrannical than make the peasants work in the rain.

The village society is, like the castle architecture, revealed in set pieces rather than through the workings of the plot. The Christmas party is a seasonal balance to the hay-making which indicates the closeness of the agricultural community to the seasons. The Christmas party again shows the hierarchical nature of the village community:

The young men and maidens danced morris dances in the middle, the tables having been cleared away.

The old folks sat round the walls holding glasses of mead in their hands and feeling thankful that they were past such capers, hoppings and skippings, while those children who had not been sick sat with them, and soon went to sleep, the small heads leaning against their shoulders. At the high table Sir Ector sat with his knightly guests, who had come for the morrow's hunting, smiling and nodding and drinking burgundy or sherries sack or malmsey wine.
(p. 138)

An acknowledged social structure of this kind provides stability. Master Passelewe sings his song as he had "on all similar occasions for the past half-century" (p. 139), and when Sir Ector begins his speech, the company cheers because "everybody recognized the speech which Sir Ector had made for the last twenty years, and welcomed it like a brother" (p. 140). The village changes little, and as such it is an appropriate background for a book about childhood. It has the quality of a remembered time, from which only the best memories survive. Sir Ector's place at the top of the hierarchy is a stabilising factor, but the possibility of abuse is acknowledged: "in other parts of Gramarye, of course, there did exist wicked and despotic masters" (p. 131). Sir Ector is not one of these and they do not affect the pleasant image of medieval society that exists within the barrier of the Forest Sauvage. His role is that of a protector who shares common interests with his charges:

He walked and worked among his villagers, thought of their welfare, and could tell the good workman from the bad. He was the eternal farmer, in fact -- one of those people who seem to be employing labour at so many shillings a week, but who are actually paying half as much again in voluntary overtime, providing a cottage free, and possibly making an extra present of milk and eggs and home-brewed beer into the bargain.
(p. 131)

White admires the feudal system as it would have functioned under a man like Sir Ector, as he admires the system he perceives to be descended from it. Whether either ever existed is neither here nor there.²⁹ A stable agricultural society is the background for "The Sword in the Stone" but it never becomes more than a background.

The Wart is the principal figure in "The Sword in the Stone" and its plot revolves around his education. It is significant that although he is present at both the hay-making and the Christmas feast, he is not a major figure in either episode. Castle and village society exist and the Wart exists but they are two barely overlapping circles; even though "everybody who lived in the castle was a friend of his, who might be visited on any occasion" (p. 182), the Wart is rarely shown in the context of any of these friendships. Only three people are involved. His relationship with the Dog Boy, for example, is briefly sketched:

The Wart was fond of the Dog Boy, and thought him very clever to be able to do these things with animals -- for he could make them do almost anything just by moving his hands -- while the Dog Boy loved the Wart in much the same way as his dogs loved him, and thought the Wart was almost holy because he could read and write. They spent much of the time together, rolling about with the dogs in the kennel.
(p. 39)

The Dog Boy is halfway between a dog and a human being, and the Wart's admiration and affection for him is similar to his

²⁹ Cf. Ronald Blythe, Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969), p. 79.

feeling for Cavall. The Wart is also shown with Kay and Merlyn, but they are themselves exceptional within the Castle through rank and skill. The community which lives in and around the Castle of the Forest Sauvage is a background to the Wart's growth and education, but he is not a part of it, and it will be left behind completely when his childhood ends. The distance between the Wart and village society is appropriate to his projected status in life as a squire, and even more so to his eventual status. The result is that "The Sword in the Stone" presents a character not affected by or affecting a human community. The setting evokes nostalgia for childhood and a mythical Old England, but it is a society in which the central character plays no real part.

The situation in Lothian is rather different in that the social system seems, like the architecture, to be less developed. There is no evidence of any co-operative economic activity like Sir Ector's farming; Queen Morgause appears to have no contact with the peasants, for good or ill. The peasants do, however, have a more concretely realised existence than in the Forest Sauvage, although only St. Toirdealbhach and Mother Morlan are individualised. When the English knights arrive:

The people came from everywhere, silently, vaguely. When they were near the knights, they walked slowly, but in the remoter distance they were running. Men, women and children were scuttling over the dunes or down from the castle cliff, only to break into the crawling pace as soon as they were near. At a distance of twenty yards, they halted altogether. They made a ring, staring at the newcomers mutely, like people staring at pictures in the Uffizzi. They studied them. There was no hurry now, no need

to dash off to the next picture. Indeed, there were no other pictures -- had been no others, except for the accustomed scenes of Lothian, since they were born. Their stare was not exactly an offensive one, nor was it friendly. (pp. 248-9)

The knights are objects of curiosity and fear to the villagers. Curiosity brings them running from a distance and fear holds them at twenty yards. At first the examination is silent, but then:

Mother Morlan and the auld wives started to say the rosary, while the young women pinched each other and giggled -- the men, having doffed their caps in deference to the praying, began to exchange in Gaelic such remarks as "Look at the black man, God between us and harm," or "Do they be naked at bedtime, or how do they get the iron pots off them whatever?"

(p. 249)

The Lothian peasants do not exist as individuals any more than do the peasants of the Forest Sauvage. Their conventional Celtic speech emphasizes their identity as a group. They are shown to function as a mass and described in terms of sub-groups within the community, for example, "the auld wives" and "the young women." White presents no individual reactions to the arrival of the English knights. The response of the separate groups is rapidly superseded by a mass response:

In the minds of both women and men, irrespective of age or circumstance, there began to grow, almost visibly, almost tangibly, the enormous, the incalculable miasma which is the leading feature of the Gaelic brain. (p. 249)

The arrival of the English knights is the only occasion on which the people of Lothian as a whole are presented, but that occasion nevertheless creates an impression of a community,

bound by common beliefs. The peasants are ignorant, they have never seen armour before; they are religious, to a greater or lesser extent; and they are extremely suspicious.

Gawaine and his brothers are linked with the community in contrast to the Wart and Kay's isolation from the peasants in the Forest Sauvage. The Orkney brothers are on calling terms with Mother Morlan and St. Toirdealbhach, and the boys' aristocratic rank seems to be no social barrier. They seek the old woman and the saint as sources of information and entertainment: "'God and Mary to you, Mother Morlan,' said Gawaine. 'We have come for a story, ma'am, about the shee'" (p. 242). The importance of storytelling in the culture of Lothian is indicated at the beginning of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" when Gawaine tells the story of Uther and Igraine. The boys' eagerness to seek out stories from Mother Morlan suggests a lack of reserve between the different classes in Lothian. Storytelling is a cultural link which crosses class boundaries. The lack of reserve is further illustrated when the English knights arrive, and "the young princelings of Lothian got off their donkeys as if in a trance, and joined the circle" (p. 249), and when the compliance of Meg, the kitchenmaid, in the unicorn hunt is not secured by an appeal to rank, but by physical force in tying her pigtails to a heather root (p. 263). The brothers' visits to St. Toirdealbhach are further motivated by their mother's lack of interest in them:

He was a source of mental nourishment to them -- a sort of guru, as Merlyn had been to Arthur, who gave

them what little culture they were ever to get. They resorted to him like hungry puppies anxious for any kind of eatable, when their mother had cast them out. He had taught them to read and write. (p. 258)

St. Toirdealbhach fulfils an important function for the boys' and in teaching them to read and write he acknowledges their status in society. In their dealings with the Lothian peasants, however, status does not appear to be very important.

Neither "The Sword in the Stone" nor "The Queen of Air and Darkness" contain detailed portraits of societies, but both create an impression of the main concerns and motivations of village communities. Unlike the Forest Sauvage, in Lothian the young aristocracy is integrated into the community. Gawaine and his brothers lack the love and interest of a family which is provided by Sir Ector and Merlyn but their integration into the village provides a partial substitute. The Orkney brothers are much more the product of Dunlothian than the Wart is of the village of the Forest Sauvage.

The vagueness of physical setting in the court sections of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" corresponds to a vagueness about social setting. Only four characters appear in the court scenes: Arthur, Merlyn, Kay, and Sir Ector, and they are completely isolated from any other society. In Chapter II of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" Arthur and Merlyn are standing on the battlements looking out over the country. The society which Arthur governs is both vivid and generalised:

Outside the curtain wall, there was the distant noise of old wives bargaining, and brats bawling, and corporals quaffing, and a few goats mixed with it, and two or three lepers in white hoods ringing bells as they walked, and the swishing robes of nuns who were kindly visiting the poor, two by two, and a fight going on between some gentlemen who were interested in horses. On the other side of the river, which ran directly beneath the castle wall, there was a man ploughing in the fields, with his plough tied to the horse's tail. The wooden plough squeaked. There was a silent person near him, fishing for salmon with worms -- the rivers were not polluted in those days -- and further off, there was a donkey giving his musical concert to the coming night. (p. 224)

Arthur is physically separated from the town, he is inside the curtain wall and on top of the battlements. His physical elevation reflects his social position and recalls Sir Ector's standing on the rick at hay-making. The town is full of life, movement and noise; there are people of different ranks engaged in a variety of business. In the passage quoted five different kinds of animal are mentioned, and they are given as much emphasis as the people, suggesting the humans' dependence on the animals. The people are not individualised: they are too far away to be seen as individuals. They are simply nuns, corporals, or lepers, figures in an impression of the town in the early evening rather than characters with individual lives. They are not, however, presented as a mass of humanity, because that would sacrifice the variety. The description of the town is economical and precise; the corporals do not drink, which suggests simply an action to quench the thirst, but they quaff, suggesting sociability. The brats do not cry, but bawl, which is much noisier. The vividness of the description serves as a background for

Arthur; but he is not a part of it. In "The Sword in the Stone" the Wart is rarely shown to be part of the community, although it is sometimes stated that he was. In "The Queen of Air and Darkness" Arthur is shown as distant from society; there has been a development from absence of involvement to positive distance. In my discussion of the unity of The Once and Future King I showed that Arthur has to learn the dignity appropriate to a king in his dealings with the characters close to him, but the need to learn dignity in relation to the populace is not so great because the distance already exists.

The distance between Arthur and the people he governs is such that he has to learn to be concerned for their welfare. His initial reaction to the first Gaelic war, that "it was a splendid battle" (p. 225), is modified by Merlyn's arguments. Arthur's youthful enthusiasm and confidence, together with the personal safety in battle afforded him by armour, led him to neglect the fate of the footsoldiers. Arthur's own instincts are humane: he regards Sir Bruce Sans Pitié as a "swine" and a "marauder" (p. 228). He is ready to be convinced, therefore, when Merlyn tells him that seven hundred kerns were killed in the battle saying: "You see, it is a question of the people, as well as of the kings. When you said about the battle being a lovely one, you were thinking like your father" (p. 228). Merlyn points out that there is no great difference between people like Sir Bruce and Arthur's own knights who go to battle encased in metal, and that they have a brutalising

effect on the country as a whole:

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, 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. (p. 229)

This picture of the country at war contrasts with the view that Arthur and Merlyn had from the battlements, and also with life in the Forest Sauvage when Uther was king. Arthur is the king of a country where brutality is the norm, but he has failed to recognise it. His own childhood was idyllic, and although the forest was said to be a dangerous place the boys were rarely exposed to any danger. In the first version of The Sword in the Stone the boys are captured by Madame Mim and the Wart visits Galapas: both are dangerous characters, but because they are among the fantastic elements of the book they do not suggest human wickedness. In the revised version even these dangers are omitted, and the danger presented by Morgan le Fay is supernatural rather than human. The Wart's childhood is charmed and there is no hint of the kind of violence which Merlyn ascribes to the rule of Uther Pendragon. The Orkney brothers, however, were brought up with a greater familiarity with brutality, for example, "when she [Queen Morgause] found out about the unicorn later in the evening she had them whipped for it" (p. 270).

As a result of his upbringing Arthur is ignorant of the general wickedness of the world. He is compassionate, but

suffering must be brought to his attention. Part of Merlyn's role as teacher in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" is to explain to Arthur the nature of a society which he has not experienced directly and never will. His aloofness does not imply a lack of compassion but an ignorance of wickedness and suffering. When Arthur learns about the effects of war he rapidly comes to the conclusion that Might is not Right, but in a rather distant and academic way.

In "The Ill-Made Knight" and "The Candle in the Wind" even the limited social context of the earlier books disappears almost completely. Lancelot is the focus of "The Ill-Made Knight," and neither as a child nor as an adult is he shown as part of a community. In "The Ill-Made Knight" there is no social setting for Lancelot's childhood comparable to The Castle of the Forest Sauvage or Dunlothian. As a child Lancelot is committed to Arthur's ideal of the Round Table and he remains so throughout his life. The rigorous training he undergoes isolates him, and later in life he is separated from the other knights by his position as the best knight in the world. The Round Table is the only community to which Lancelot belongs, but it functions mainly as a background and motivation for his actions. In "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness" communities are backgrounds for the main characters, but in "The Ill-Made Knight" the community is one of knights rather than peasants. The same difference in status exists, however, between the main character and the social background. As Arthur or the Orkney

brothers are socially superior to the peasant communities in which they live, so Lancelot is superior as a knight to every other member of the Round Table except Galahad.

Lancelot's relationship to the Round Table is complicated: he is motivated to act as he does from a commitment to its ideals, and he inspires others to try to emulate his achievements. He is a servant and a symbol of the Table at the same time. His quests, to carry out the aims of the Table and to escape from Guenever, are undertaken, for the most part, alone. It is notable that when White takes quests from Malory, he generally omits episodes in which various knights meet and continue the quest together. In Malory questing is almost a social activity, but in White, where only Lancelot's quests are described, apart from the Holy Grail, it is a solitary pursuit. A significant area of deviation from Malory is that for White Tristram is a minor character who is referred to by other characters but does not actually appear in the book at all. The encounters between Lancelot and Tristram in Le Morte Darthur show them to be almost equally matched as knights. Early in "The Ill-Made Knight" we are told: "Lancelot ended by being the greatest knight King Arthur had. He was a sort of Bradman, top of the batting averages. Tristram and Lamorak were second and third" (p. 330), but because Tristram and Lamorak are largely absent from the book, Lancelot is more isolated in his greatness.

Chapter III of "The Candle in the Wind," one of the two before-and-after descriptions of Arthur's England, is presented in the context of Lancelot and Guenever's looking out of a window early one evening. The picture of England is of a civilisation at its peak, on which the sun is about to set. Lancelot and Guenever, like Arthur on the battlements in "The Queen of Air and Darkness," are not a part of the picture: literally and figuratively they are above it and outside it. Throughout all four books of The Once and Future King society is presented sympathetically, but the characters are distanced from it. Arthur, in the set piece descriptions, is presented as the architect of a peace which benefits the peasants more than anyone else. The peasants, however, exist outside and below the castle walls and are not shown to demand the solution which Arthur imposes.

The only popular leader in The Once and Future King is Mordred. In "The Candle in the Wind" he becomes the leader of the party which opposes Arthur's rule, although it is Agravaine who first suggests the possibility of harnessing general discontent to their own ends:

You need a national grievance -- something to do with politics which is waiting to burst out. You need to use the tools which are ready to hand. This man John Ball, for instance, who believes in communism: he has thousands of followers who would be ready to help in a disturbance, for their own purposes. Or there are the Saxons. We could say we were in favour of a national movement. For that matter, we could join them together and call it national communism. But it has to be something broad and popular, which everybody can feel. It must be against large numbers of people, like the Jews or the Normans or the Saxons, so that everybody can be angry.

(p. 549)

Mordred and Agravaine plan cynically to exploit the dissatisfaction in the country to further their personal grievances against Arthur. Agravaine's suggestions of the name "national communism" and the adoption of the fylfot as an emblem (p. 550) are echoes of Nazism. However, although Mordred is leader of the popular party, he is even less part of a social context than any of the other characters. Mordred's motives in founding a movement are personal, but he is successful in mobilising mass support: "there were already thousands, spread over the country, who carried his badge of a scarlet fist clenching a whip, and who called themselves Thrashers" (p. 628). Nevertheless he is set apart, even from his brothers, by his birth and upbringing, and despite his ability to exploit the political situation he is not a functioning member of society.

Mordred is the only character in The Once and Future King who is shown to have this kind of popular political support, and Arthur, during his meditation in the final chapter, recognises its potency: "A leader was surely forced to offer something which appealed to those he led? He might give the impetus to a falling building, but surely it had to be toppling on its own account before it fell?" (p.668). It is striking that the only character to respond politically to the demands of the population is the focus of all the evil at the end of the book. The common people, about whom Arthur is so concerned throughout, are incapable of choosing a good

leader; in following Mordred they exhibit stupidity, if not wickedness. In this respect The Once and Future King is consistent with White's admiration of Queen Victoria who "devoted her energies towards preventing that Gadarene rush of the proletariat which has led to the bureaucracy of the present day."²⁹ Such an attitude to the population as a mass perhaps suggests why White created a distance between his major characters and the wider social context in The Once and Future King.

Arthur's response to the physical landscape of his country, as described in Chapter 18 of The Book of Merlyn, is inextricably linked with his feeling for the people: "He could tell how the common people would feel about things, about all sorts of things, before he asked them. He was their king" (The Book of Merlyn p. 110). This description of kingship implies a closeness to the people which has not been revealed in the rest of the book. Discussions about the state of the country and ways of dealing with it all take place with the main characters distanced from and elevated above society. Of course, White's portrait of Arthur is, in this respect, consistent with the reality of medieval kingship. The mass of the population had no direct part in the running of the country. White, however, introduces an element of inconsistency in suggesting that Arthur was aware of "how the common people would feel about things," when the

²⁹ White, The Scandalmonger, p. 208.

portrait of the king shows an individual distanced from society.

In the early books of The Once and Future King the social setting is briefly sketched, but the main characters do not form a part of it. In the later books, even the limited presentation of social setting largely disappears. The life of communities is a background for the events of childhood but the mature lives of the main characters are enacted in isolation from society. Their rôles as leaders within that society place them in a position untypical of characters in a mainstream novel. Nevertheless, their personal tragedies affect the wider community, so that although Arthur, Lancelot and Guenever do not function in a vividly realised social setting of the kind typical of mainstream novels, their lives have a profound effect on the society which they lead. Social setting is one of the principal features of the mainstream novel, and its absence from The Once and Future King might suggest that that book cannot be regarded as a novel. However, generic criticism does not rely on a single feature, and the next chapter will show that The Once and Future King exhibits other features of the novel more clearly.

Chapter Five

Elements of the Novel in White's Arthurian Books

II Narrative and Characterization

In Chapter Four I argued that three main features of the mainstream novel are important in a consideration of the genre of White's Arthurian books: social setting, narrative, and the presentation of character. Having shown that White's Arthurian books are concerned with social setting to only a limited extent, I shall now show that their narrative and characterization are rooted firmly in the mainstream novel tradition. The arrangement of the present chapter reflects the particular links between narrative and characterisation in White's work.

The narrator is the principal vehicle for story-telling within the novel, and in The Once and Future King the manner of telling the story assumes a particular importance because the story is a familiar one. The rôle of the narrator is subject to much variation within the novel and its subgenres, but its function is always to tell readers that which is not shown by other means; it is vital because it fills the gaps

between characters and their actions. The narrator's words are the channel of communication through which everything except direct speech must pass. A variety of positions are open to the narrator. He may be omniscient and either intrusive or unobtrusive; he may be a character who is involved in the action to some extent; or he may tell the story from the point of view of a single character. Readers of a novel may respond to a narrator in a way similar to that in which they respond to characters, whether or not he functions as one. The narrator is always closer to the reader than any other character because only he communicates directly with the reader. In Great Expectations,¹ for example, Pip's early life is presented with the benefit of hindsight so that a tone of regret and condemnation colours the presentation of his youthful behaviour. Told in the third person, such a story would have a much more hopeful tone in the middle section of the book because it would be unaffected by Pip's later feeling of remorse. Narrative position is not necessarily constant throughout a novel: the focus can change frequently or be deceptive. It is possible for a narrator to comment subtly on the characters by appearing to use characters' own words, but investing them with greater meaning. The opening sentence of Pride and Prejudice, for example, tells us that "it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."² The appeal to

¹Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, (1861; London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

² Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 3.

universality suggests that the statement has the authority of the omniscient narrator. It rapidly becomes clear, however, that it is the opinion only of Mrs. Bennett rather than the universe as a whole, and that the narrator, in revealing an aspect of Mrs. Bennett's character, has also indicated the narrator's attitude to the character.

The narrator is the link between the reader and the action of the novel. The implicit authority of the narrator's words can direct responses to it. Different methods of narration and the development of ideas about the point of view from which a novel is presented extended the boundaries of the novel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Henry James sought to reduce the overt influence of the narrator and allow readers to perceive the events and characters of his novels as his protagonist perceived them. This provided an alternative to the unrealistic quality of omniscient narration where the narrator had equal access to the thoughts and motivation of all characters. More recently, however, some novelists have returned to the use of an intrusive omniscient narrator who draws attention to the fictive quality of the work. In David Lodge's How Far Can You Go?, for example, the narrator addresses the reader directly to reveal certain facts about the book as a literary object:

Ten characters is a lot to take in all at once, and soon there will be more, because we are going to follow their fortunes, in a matter of speaking, up to the present, and obviously they are not going to pair off with each other, that would be too neat, too implausible, so there will be other characters not yet invented, husbands and wives and lovers, not to mention parents and children, so it is important

to get these ten straight now. Each character, for instance, has already been associated with some selected detail of dress or appearance which should help you to distinguish one from another. Such details also carry connotations which symbolize certain qualities or attributes of the character. Thus Angela's very name connotes angel, as in Heaven and cake (she looks good enough to eat in her pink angora sweater) and her blonde hair archetypically casts her as the fair virtuous woman.³

The narrator tells the reader that the novel is about a group of people, rather than one or two, and that it uses symbols. More important than the information imparted, however, is that the narrator directly addresses the reader about the fictional world of the novel. Lodge breaks the dominant convention of the narrator talking to herself or himself about characters who have an objective reality. The status of the book as a literary creation is emphasized later in the same passage when the name of a character is changed: "Let her be called Violet, no, Veronica, no Violet."⁴ Indecision about the name of the character exposes the fictive quality of the book; the characters are shown to have no existence until the author calls them into being, and the author then has absolute power over them. There is a long tradition, going back to Sterne, of a playful narrator, who emphasizes fictionality; such a narrative attitude is not incompatible with realism.⁵

Changes in the rôle of the narrator form an interesting strand in the development of the novel, and at the time when

³ David Lodge, How Far Can You Go? (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), p. 14.

⁴ Lodge, How Far Can You Go?, p. 15.

⁵ Watson, pp. 1-14.

White was writing the domination of the omniscient narrator had been broken, but not swept away completely. White's approach is characteristically idiosyncratic.

The narrator of The Once and Future King is omniscient and intrusive, providing detail which goes beyond the immediate physical and social setting of the action, in for example, the inclusion of the list of contents of the barrel in the description of the armoury at Benwick Castle (pp. 331-2). Similarly the characters' thoughts, as well as their words and actions, are revealed in the usual manner of an omniscient narrator. In The Once and Future King, however, the technique is taken further and the narrator comments on the characters' unconscious motivations. Kay, for example, is described as "one of those people who would be neither a follower nor a leader, but only an aspiring heart, impatient in the failing body which imprisoned it" (p. 34-35). Thus one of the most problematic figures in the Arthurian legend is characterized succinctly.⁶ The narrator is willing both to reveal more information than can be gleaned from the plot alone and to give a traditionally unpleasant character the benefit of the doubt. White is constrained in the facts of Kay's actions by the story, for example, the incident of Kay's claiming for himself the achievement of pulling the sword from the stone occurs in Malory (I 3-5: Spisak, pp. 37-38). The narrator's sympathetic attitude encourages the

⁶ A study of the development of Cei's character is announced: Linda M. Gowans Cei and the Arthurian Legend, Arthurian Studies XVIII (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1988).

reader to understand a character whose actions alone would elicit condemnation. Throughout The Once and Future King there are two main strands to the narrative: the narrator's presentation of background information, and the presentation of character.

The opening paragraph of "The Sword in the Stone" sets the narrative tone for the rest of that book. It consists entirely of information imparted by the narrator to the reader, almost all in the form of simple sentences: "On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays it was Court Hand and Summulae Logicales, while the rest of the week it was the Organon, Repetition and Astrology" (p. 3). Subsequent sentences in the first paragraph, except the penultimate, all have the structure subject-verb: "the governess was . . .," "she did not . . .," "the Wart was. . ." etc. (p. 3). A contract is created between narrator and reader in which the narrator is the giver of information and the reader is the receiver. There is also an important element of specific explanation, for example, about who Sir Ector was and why Kay's knuckles were not rapped. The paragraph contains a mixture of vital and peripheral information; details about the governess, her red hair and the location of her wound, although significantly not her name, are apparently given equal weight with information about the Wart's social status.

The dominant explanatory tone, and the simple presentation in "The Sword in the Stone" is a factor in the

general acknowledgement of the book as a work for children. The age of the protagonist is also regarded as an indicator of the intended audience of a book. Although stories about children are generally written for children, this is not always true: for example, The Lord of the Elies is about children, but is not a children's book. There are, of course, many children's stories about adults: for instance, many versions of the Arthurian story have been written for children.⁷ White's own attitude to children's literature seems to have been ambivalent:

[He] often regretted that the book-jacket designs and the blurbs were aimed at attracting only young readers. On the other hand, he rewrote Mistress Masham's Repose and The Master after being told that young children would neither understand nor appreciate the deliberate ambiguities contained in the difficult language he had used in the first versions.⁸

White recognized that the power of marketing could limit his readership and discourage adults from reading works designated as "children's books," but he also realized that certain special features are required if a book is to be fully appreciated by a young readership. He seems to have considered this problem at some length, and Gallix describes a short essay in which White argues that "the most famous children's books were never written especially for children" and that "readers should not assume that a book about children

⁷ Mary Wildman lists over seventy children's stories which have some Arthurian element, see "Twentieth-Century Arthurian Literature: An Annotated Bibliography" in Arthurian Literature II ed. Richard Barber (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, n.d.), pp. 127-62.

⁸ Gallix, Bibliography, p. xxii.

is necessarily a book for children."⁹ The heart of his problem was to prevent adults from being discouraged from reading books that were presented by publishers as children's books.

The tone of the narrative is a reliable indicator of a work's potential audience. Although there is no single narrative tone common to all imaginative literature written for children, there are certain features which occur in many such works. The language and grammar of the narrative is likely to be simple, taking account of a child's limited vocabulary. The narrator may also adopt the manner of a teacher and explain events or phenomena that are likely to be outside a child's experience. The moral position of the narrative is likely to be clear cut, with the child-protagonists on the side of right and their enemies as wrong or misguided. On the whole White adopts a tone appropriate to a work for children in "The Sword in the Stone", but because it is included in The Once and Future King adults have not been discouraged from reading it.

The narrative tone of the rest of The Once and Future King is broadly similar to that of "The Sword in the Stone." There is the same simplicity of language and sentence structure. "The Queen of Air and Darkness," for example, begins, "there was a round tower with a weather-cock on it. The weather-cock was a carrion crow, with an arrow in its beak

⁹ Gallix, Bibliography, H8, p. 95.

to point to the wind" (p. 217). The opening of "The Ill-Made Knight" also exhibits a simple sentence structure, but for the first time, more than just the basic details of the scene are presented:

In the castle of Benwick, the French boy was looking at his face in the polished surface of a kettle-hat. It flashed in the sunlight with the stubborn gleam of metal. It was practically the same as the steel helmet which soldiers still wear. (p. 327)

The brief vivid description of the hat is a new element in the narrative, but to compare it with a modern soldier's hat is a common characteristic of White's style. The narrative tones of the three later books of The Once and Future King are necessarily different from that of "The Sword in the Stone" because they are concerned with the presentation of more complex issues than the first book. However, White remains remarkably close to the initial narrative tone even when dealing with the tragic elements of the story. The relationship between Arthur and Morgause, for White the centre of the tragedy, is described only briefly and in simple terms:

It is impossible to explain how these things happen. Perhaps the Spancel had a strength in it. Perhaps it was because she was twice his age, so that she had twice the power of his weapons. Perhaps it was because Arthur was always a simple fellow, who took people at their own valuation easily. Perhaps it was because he had never known a mother of his own, so that the rôle of mother love, as she stood with her children behind her, took him between wind and water.

Whatever the explanation may have been, the Queen of Air and Darkness had a baby by her half-brother nine months later. (pp. 322-3)

This passage, with its repetition of "perhaps," contains many

uncertainties. However, all the uncertainty is in the narrator's attempt to explain the events, not in the events themselves, which are indisputable, nor in the characters' attitudes, which are never revealed. Thus the presentation of the uncertainty is quite clear; the narrator offers a number of alternative explanations to the reader for consideration. We are not invited to share the characters' experience of one of the central events of the story. The passage exhibits two significant features of the narrative. First, the presentation tends consistently to a simple definite style, even when the subject is complex or hazy. Second, the narrator implies that there are certain of the characters' experiences which he will not or cannot explain. This feature will be considered in more detail in the discussion of Lancelot's character.

Narrative plays a relatively minor part in "The Candle in the Wind" perhaps because of its origin as a drama. An exception is Chapter III (pp. 559-69), which like Chapter XXV of "The Ill-Made Knight" (pp. 442-7), was discussed in connection with setting in my previous chapter. The two have a distinctive narrative style. The technique used is a concentrated version of the one identified in "The Sword in the Stone" for imparting information about tilting, hawking, and other areas of the Wart's life. In "The Sword in the Stone" such passages are short and directly related to the plot, but in "The Ill-Made Knight" and "The Candle in the Wind" they form whole chapters, set apart from the rest of the

books. The purpose of the chapters is to show how Arthur improved society during his reign, and this is achieved by before-and-after portraits. The narrative language, departs from the neutral, informative tone of "The Sword in the Stone" to become more emotive and rhetorical: for example, "It had been no uncommon sight to see a man-at-arms whistling like a lobster, and looking like porridge, because they had emptied a bucket of boiling bran over his armour during a siege" (p. 444). These vivid similes stress the effects of war on the individual. The two chapters serve not as objective accounts of the good and evil aspects of medieval life but as arguments for the benefits of Arthur's rule. The range of facts about medieval life creates an impression of great learning on the part of the narrator.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the facts have been carefully selected and arranged to support the assertion that Arthur's reign benefitted not just the Round Table knights, but the whole kingdom. The narrator has clearly abandoned the objective and neutral position he adopted in "The Sword in the Stone" and identified himself with Arthur's ideals. The narrative authority given to the account of Arthur's achievements suggests propaganda.

White saw The Book of Merlyn as a "marvellous opportunity of bringing the wheel full circle, and ending on an animal note like the one I began on."¹¹ It also recalls "The Sword

¹⁰ For the sources of White's information, see Sprague as cited in Chapter Four n. 27.

¹¹ White, letter to L.J. Potts dated 6th December 1940 in Letters to a Friend, p. 117-8.

in the Stone" in that its narrative tone is dominated by Merlyn. I shall argue below that in "The Sword in the Stone" Merlyn is the closest character to the narrator because both share the knowledge of post-medieval history. In The Book of Merlyn the magician almost entirely usurps the rôle of narrator. He is the vehicle for a commentary on Arthur's achievements as king and on mankind's warlike propensities. The Book of Merlyn is composed very largely of dialogue, the main exceptions being the ants, the wild geese, and Arthur's meditation over a sleeping England. The rest of the book is dominated by Merlyn's attacks on mankind, fuelled by White's biological knowledge. The descriptive chapters in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" and "The Candle in the Wind" were motivated by a desire to inform the reader about the Middle Ages, and to persuade us that Arthur had created peace. Merlyn's diatribe in The Book of Merlyn continues the attempt to persuade, but its argument is a more general one about the nature and potential of humanity. Strictly, Merlyn's arguments are not narrative but the similarity of purpose to parts of "The Ill-Made Knight" and "The Candle in the Wind" must be recognized.

Because most of The Book of Merlyn is a philosophical monologue, passages of genuine narrative are rare. When such passages do occur they are among the greatest achievements of White's writing. The description of the sleeping kingdom has been discussed in the context of setting, in Chapter Four, but it also illustrates the strength of narrative which White

could command:

All the beauty of his humans came upon him, instead of their horribleness. He saw the vast army of martyrs¹² who were his witnesses: young men who had gone out even in the first joy of marriage, to be killed on dirty battle-fields like Bedegraine for other men's beliefs: but who had gone out voluntarily: but who had gone because they thought it was right: but who had gone although they hated it. They had been ignorant young men perhaps, and the things which they had died for had been useless. But their ignorance had been innocent. They had done something horribly difficult in their ignorant innocence, which was not for themselves. (The Book of Merlyn pp. 111-2)

The concept of masses dying in war is made less abstract by Arthur's understanding of individual suffering and recognition of their heroism. This passage represents a synthesis of the two strands of narrative in The Once and Future King: the narrator's information about character, and about background events. Arthur perceives the events and responds to them in a way consistent with his character.

The story of "The Sword in the Stone" is not presented through the consciousness of a child, but with an adult's perception of a child's interests, and the gaps in its knowledge which the narrator attempts to fill. The narrator's knowledge of the fictional world corresponds to a child's understanding of its parents' and teachers' knowledge. A child believes that the people on whom it relies for information are all-knowing and infallible. The narrator of

¹² Cf. "noble army of martyrs" in the Te Deum, Book of Common Prayer 1662.

"The Sword in the Stone" rarely reveals a gap in his information or a reluctance to impart that knowledge to the reader. The relationship between narrator and reader in "The Sword in the Stone" parallels that between the Wart and Merlyn. The inside of Merlyn's cottage in the forest is described before the characters enter it: "It was a cottage, although the Wart could not notice this at the time, which was divided into two bits" (p. 22). The Wart does not need to experience something in order for the narrator to reveal it to the reader. He is able to bypass the characters, emphasizing that he is doing so, by stating that the Wart "could not notice" the feature of the cottage that he, the narrator, is able to describe. As a result, although "The Sword in the Stone" has a child as its main character and is understood and appreciated by children, it is presented through a consciousness that is conspicuously not that of a child.

Merlyn's cottage is the physical repository of his varied interests and vast knowledge, and the narrator's direct knowledge of the cottage establishes a special link with Merlyn. The Wart's entry to Merlyn's study is the occasion for a description, but one much more detailed and various than the Wart could possibly have registered upon first entering the room. Again the narrator is bypassing the Wart's perception. His response is summarized in the single-sentence paragraph: "it was the most marvellous room that he had ever been in" (p. 24). The simple structure and

vocabulary of this sentence is appropriate to a boy's reaction, but the narrator is taking up an intermediate position between the description of the character's thoughts or words and the direct presentation of them. The description itself, however, lists many anachronistic items which are outside the experience of a boy. The Wart would not be able to recognize or understand "a guncase with all sorts of weapons which would not be invented for half a thousand years," nor could he appreciate "the fourteenth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (marred as it was by the sensationalism of the popular plates)" or "a complete set of cigarette cards depicting wildfowl by Peter Scott" (p. 25). The description of Merlyn's study serves a variety of purposes, one of which is to emphasize the narrator's independence of the characters. The breadth of knowledge displayed by the narrator is matched only by Merlyn, who shares the same temporal perspective. Merlyn's consciousness does not, however, control the narrative; his function is to provide experience for the Wart, and the narrator's is to present that experience using a breadth of knowledge as great as Merlyn's, or we may later come to suspect, even greater.

The narrator is also independent of Merlyn in that he expresses interest in subjects for which Merlyn has only contempt, for example, jousting. The magician's opinion of knightly exercise and those who excel at it is definite:

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! It makes me tired. Why, I believe Sir Ector would have

been gladder to get a by-our-lady tilting blue for your tutor, that swings himself along on his knuckles like an anthropoid ape, rather than a magician of known probity and international reputation with first-class honours from every European university. The trouble with the Norman Aristocracy is that they are games-mad, that is what it is, games-mad. (p. 55)

The narrator does not share his view, and thus establishes that his point of view is not necessarily the same as Merlyn's. He is an interested admirer of chivalric skills and takes the opportunity once more to inform the reader:

Tilting was a great art and needed practice. When two knights jousted they held their lances in their right hands, but they directed their horses at one another so that each man had his opponent on his near side. The base of the lance, in fact, was held on the opposite side of the body to the side at which the enemy was charging. This seems rather inside out to anybody who is in the habit, say, of opening gates with a hunting-crop, but it had its reasons. For one thing, it meant that the shield was on the left arm, so that the opponents charged shield to shield, fully covered. It also meant that a man could be unhorsed with the side or edge of the lance, in a kind of horizontal swipe, if you did not feel sure of hitting him with your point. This was the humblest or least skilful blow in jousting. (p. 52)

In this passage the narrator goes beyond a description of the fictional world to an explanation of how it functions. In the passage quoted above, the style is simple; most of the sentences are statements of fact and there is no imagery. The passage is not an account of a joust between two particular knights, but an explanation of tilting in general. Each sentence describes a particular stage in the joust, so that the picture is broken down into steps and each is presented separately. The paragraph works in four phases. The first

is a generalization about tilting, which in establishing it as a "great art" provides the justification for the rest of the paragraph. The next two sentences describe the manner of holding the lance and its position in the charge in simple and economical language. No stylistic decoration obscures the facts but the next sentence draws the reader imaginatively into the joust by relating its techniques to those of a comparable activity. The use of a modern parallel is a common feature of White's narrative style, which places a higher value on an understanding of the medieval world than on the creation of a consistent illusion. The two following sentences move from the presentation of fact to the reasons for the technique, again in simple language and drawing the reader into the description by the use of the second person pronoun. The final sentence balances the first, both in length and character as a statement of fact. The straightforward and colloquial style creates the impression of a narrator who, having a great fund of knowledge, wants to share it with the readers, but does not adopt an elevated position from which to communicate it. The unfamiliarity of the fictional world is recognized and provides the motive for accounts of various features of medieval life, not only tilting, but hay-making, hawking and boar-hunting. The narrator's impulse to inform also asserts itself occasionally in the later books, for example, the description of St. Toirdealbhach's bestiary (p. 261-2) or the armoury in the castle of Benwick (p. 327). It is a mark of White's particular skills that these interruptions to the story do not

become tedious. The narrator is interested in a wide variety of subjects and engages the reader's interest in them.

The humour of the narrative demystifies the explanation of jousting in general and the encounter between King Pellinore and Sir Grummore in particular. When the knight arrives on the scene, his appearance is described in more detail:

Sir Grummore Grummursum was cantering up the clearing in full panoply of war. Instead of his ordinary helmet with a visor he was wearing the proper tilting-helm, which looked like a large coal-scuttle, and as he cantered he clanged. (p. 59)

The first three-quarters of the paragraph is an apparently serious and sober mixture of information and evocative language. The "full panoply of war" suggests spectacle and pageantry, but comparison of the tilting helm with a prosaic coal-scuttle undermines it. Sound is as important as vision in this description and the alliteration of the final clause completes the comic effect. The knight's equipment is presented humorously from a twentieth-century point of view, and the whole tenor of Sir Grummore's character makes it appropriate that he should be wearing a coal-scuttle.

The narrator of "The Sword in the Stone" is omniscient and intrusive: he is the source of information about the fictional world of the book. Omniscience manifests itself also in the more conventional way of revealing character directly rather than through dialogue and action. A

narrator's presentation of character can work in two ways: statements about characters made externally by the narrator, for example, "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich," and description or statement of the characters' thoughts and feelings, for example, "Sandy felt offended and belittled."¹³ The statement about Kay, that he was "only an aspiring heart, impatient in the failing body which imprisoned it" (pp.34-35), is an example of the former. Kay, as an adolescent, does not draw this conclusion about himself because it depends on a knowledge of his future. The narrator never reveals any of Kay's thoughts directly, but makes judgements about him, or allows the Wart to do so, for example: "Wart knew that if he told the elder boy about his conversation with Merlyn, Kay would refuse to be condescended to, and would not come" (p. 90). The Wart is the only character in "The Sword in the Stone" whose feelings are revealed by the narrator for, example:

The Wart was not a proper son. He did not understand this, but it made him feel unhappy, because Kay seemed to regard it as making him inferior in some way. Also it was different not having a father and mother, and Kay had taught him that being different was wrong. Nobody talked to him about it, but he thought about it when he was alone, and was distressed. He did not like people to bring it up. Since the other boy always did bring it up when a question of precedence arose, he had got into the habit of giving in at once before it could be mentioned. Besides he admired Kay and was a born follower. He was a hero-worshipper.

(p. 8)

¹³ Jane Austen, Emma, p. 5; Muriel Spark, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, p. 19.

The passage exhibits a mixture of direct relation of the boy's feelings and narrative comment about them. The vagueness of the sentence "he was not a proper son" reflects the child's confusion about his status and his lack of language to express it. His feelings, however, are not vague and his method of dealing with them is described in a combination of childlike and sophisticated language. "He did not like people to bring it up" is the child's response, but contrast the following sentence, which uses vocabulary unsuited to a child, and stands out as information supplied by the narrator. The last two sentences of the paragraph seem to be conclusions drawn by the narrator rather than any kind of self-awareness shown by the character. The narrator's presentation of character in "The Sword in the Stone" is a mixture of description, used for all characters, and the revelation of the character's feelings, by means of description and free indirect speech, which is used only for the Wart. Such variation is characteristic of novel narrators and the technique of informing us about all characters, but giving more information about a specific character, identifies that character as the centre of interest in the book.

The narrative technique of the remaining three books of The Once and Future King, although similar to that of "The Sword in the Stone," places less emphasis on information about medieval life and more on character. However, the feelings of various characters are presented in a way that they are not in the first book. "The Sword in the Stone" establishes the

pre-eminence of Arthur but the later books extend the narrator's range to reveal the thoughts of all the major characters. The treatment of the Orkney brothers will serve as an example of the narrative contribution to the development of character. When Gawaine tells the story of Uther and Igraine the boys' reactions to it are described:

It was the unfairness of the rape of their Cornish grandmother which was hurting Gareth -- the picture of weak and innocent people victimized by a resistless tyranny -- the old tyranny of the Gail -- which was felt like a personal wrong by every crofter of the Islands. Gareth was a generous boy. He hated the idea of strength against weakness. It made his heart swell, as if he were going to suffocate. Gawaine, on the other hand, was angry because it had been against his family. He did not think it was wrong for strength to have its way, but only that it was intensely wrong for anything to succeed against his own clan. He was neither clever nor sensitive, but he was loyal -- stubbornly sometimes, and even annoyingly and stupidly so in later life. For him it was then as it was always to be: Up Orkney, Right or Wrong. The third brother, Agravaine, was moved because it was a matter which concerned his mother. He had curious feelings about her, which he kept to himself. As for Gaheris, he did and felt what the others did. (p. 221-2)

In describing Gareth's reaction first, the expected order of precedence, starting with the eldest, is broken and an order of moral superiority is introduced. The sliding scale of attention given to the brothers is an indication of their importance in the rest of the book. Gareth's greater sensitivity, revealed by emotive language, marks him out as a sympathetic character. Gareth's position of priority indicates his superiority so that he becomes the standard by which the others are judged, but the account of the other three then reverts to the natural order of precedence.

Gawaine's reaction is described in less detail than Gareth's and in a more emphatic style. His lack of cleverness and sensitivity are stated as bald facts rather than revealed through his response to the story, as Gareth's qualities are. Agravaine is accorded even less space, but whereas Gareth's feelings are explored thoroughly and Gawaine's are shown to be limited, his reaction is deliberately slurred over. Agravaine's "curious feelings" are left unexplored because his own secrecy about them prevents them from being common property as the other boys' emotions are. The secret is shared by the narrator but he too is unwilling to share it with the reader. Explicit secrecy naturally invites curiosity, and White conveys Morgause's sexual attraction for Agravaine by overtly restricting the information given. Gaheris is described in a single sentence, which is apparently contradictory. His brothers' feelings are so widely divergent that it seems unlikely that Gaheris could feel as they all did. He is an imitator who constantly follows one or other of his brothers: he is involved in the murder of Lamorak and he also follows Gareth to join the guard against Lancelot's rescue of Guenever.

"The Ill-Made Knight" introduces the last two major characters in the book, Lancelot and Guenever. Lancelot's character is presented through a combination of narrative comment and action, but Guenever is a product almost entirely of narrative comment. A key feature of Lancelot's character is revealed in the second paragraph of the book:

The boy thought that there was something wrong with him. All through his life -- even when he was a great man with the world at his feet -- he was to feel this gap: something at the bottom of his heart of which he was aware, and ashamed, but which he did not understand. There is no need for us to try to understand it. We do not have to dabble in a place which he preferred to keep secret. (p. 327)

The objectivity and authority of this narrative comment extends to the whole of Lancelot's life, but once again the narrator makes an appeal to privacy as a reason for limiting his examination of a character's feelings. As with the relationship between Arthur and Morgause, and Agravaine's feelings for his mother, the narrator implies that there are features of a character which ought not to be probed. The acknowledgement that some feelings should always be secret is a strength of the narrative rather than a weakness. White's use of the narrative to emphasise this complex aspect of Lancelot's character shows a subtlety of approach when compared to the description of Arthur, who was "a simple fellow, who took people at their own valuation easily" (p. 322). It is not a momentary glance into Lancelot's mind but an analysis of part of a fundamental aspect of his character. Lancelot is particularly fertile ground for this approach; his madness, his acute spiritual awareness and the contradictions inherent in his lifelong betrayal of Arthur invite psychological enquiry.

The narrator's limit on how far the reader should attempt to understand Lancelot is an unusual feature in the novel, in which a deep understanding of the major characters

is valued. Paradoxically the narrative comments on character in "The Ill-Made Knight" are often psychological in approach, in that they seek to explain character, often in terms of the subconscious. Lancelot's dream about the well prompts the comment: "Seven hundred years ago . . . people took dreams as seriously as the psychiatrists do today" (p. 328). Like the coal-scuttle in "The Sword in the Stone," the reference to psychiatry places the narrator in the same time frame as the reader and indicates the influence of nineteenth- and twentieth-century interests in the working of the mind. Throughout "The Ill-Made Knight" the narrator's comments on the complexity of Lancelot's character show an expectation that the reader will be familiar with psychological ideas; for example, "it was for the strange reason that he was cruel, that the poor fellow never killed a man who asked for mercy, or committed a cruel action which he could have prevented" (p. 353).

The development of Lancelot's character also depends on dialogue and action, but Guenever is created through narrative comment alone. Furthermore, what the narrator says about the Queen carries much less authority than what he says about Lancelot. It seems as though the limit of the narrator's omniscience has been reached and that conclusions about Guenever have to be worked out much more carefully than those about other characters. Chapter IX, for example, begins "It is difficult to explain about Guenever. . ." (p. 378), and although the passage goes on to explain about her, the

assertion of difficulty in such a dominant position remains influential. The narrator is struggling with the character, and the reader must work that much harder to understand her than either Arthur or Lancelot. The treatment of her character, when compared with Arthur and Lancelot indicates the narrative position quite finely. Detailed analyses of some characters are possible and the narrator is willing to range over their whole lives and deep into their subconscious to provide them. This ability has its limits, however, and although it is possible for the narrator to reveal Guenever's feelings, for example, towards Arthur: "She had felt respect for him, with gratitude, kindness, love, and a sense of protection. She had felt more than this -- you might say that she had felt everything except the passion of romance" (p. 378), there are fewer objective comments or explanations of Guenever's character than there are for the male characters.

The role of the narrator is not a fixed element in the generic repertoire, and can perform many functions in many ways. That the narrator in The Once and Future King does so is not inconsistent with the book's status as a novel. Both the omniscience and the intrusiveness of the narrator are common features of the mainstream novel tradition, although they had been questioned by the time that White was writing. It can be argued that an intrusive narrator draws attention to the fictional quality of the work, but in The Once and Future King the intrusions, by supporting the story with background information, strengthen the illusion rather than destroy it.

The rôle of the narrator in The Once and Future King, then, is consistent with narrative techniques used in the tradition of the mainstream novel.

Frye sees characterization as one of the distinguishing features of the novel, in that "the novelist deals with personality, with characters wearing their personae or social masks. He needs the framework of a stable society."¹⁴ The novelist's presentation of character is, in this respect, linked with the novel's social dimension. Characters are revealed within a social context and must be consistent with it. It is not only in social interaction that characters are created, however, and the novelist can reveal much more than what passes between characters; what Forster calls "the hidden life."¹⁵ Techniques for revealing the hidden life have developed throughout the history of the novel. Richardson allowed Pamela's self-analysis to reveal aspects of her character which would not have been apparent from the action of the book. Her letters reveal not only the fact that she refuses to submit to Mr. B., but also what she feels about her situation. From a character's self-revelation, the next step is to the narrator's revelation about a character. This approach admits greater subtlety because it can communicate facets of a character which self-analysis, however

¹⁴ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 305.

¹⁵ Forster, p. 31.

clear sighted, could not reveal; for example:

The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened to alloy her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her.¹⁶

This passage gives an apparently objective account of Emma's personality, including Emma's lack of objectivity about herself. Such a means of representing characters parallels most people's habit of making judgements about others; it is a technique of representational realism and it can be used with great subtlety. For example, description of character by a narrator allows the introduction of elements other than social interaction, such as motivation, or links with a character's past. A narrator's judgement about character can be at variance with other evidence, thus raising questions about a character and undermining any apparent absolute objectivity of the narrator.

The early development of the novel has been associated with the rise of individualism, which is consistent with the novel's presentation of characters rather than types. Later in the history of the novel the growth of interest in psychology influenced novelists. A concern with the way in which the mind functions, and with the presentation of its workings was at the root of stream-of-consciousness narration. The mainstream novel since then has generally placed a high

¹⁶ Jane Austen, *Emma*, p. 5-6.

value on the psychological realism of characterisation and the relationships between characters.

There are three principal ways in which a novelist can present character: the narrator can give information, other characters can do likewise, and characters can reveal themselves by words or action. In the light of the great variety of effects which can be achieved, this repertoire seems surprisingly limited. The combination of these techniques, however, with other features of the novel, such as social and physical setting, plot, and symbolism, expands the range of possible effects.

The manner of presentation of character in the novel, although subject to a variety of approaches, usually has certain basic features. In declining order of necessity a character in a novel generally has gender, age, a particular appearance, and a perhaps name, even if that character appears only once as "a man," "a young woman," or "a fair-haired child." A more central character has all these attributes plus thoughts, speech, feelings, and actions. The method of presenting character varies as much as the role of the narrator discussed above, and as that discussion indicated, narrative is often an important element in characterization. The main variation in the contribution of narrative to character is in the degree of analysis and description of action and thought. It is possible for a narrator simply to describe what characters felt, or to go

beyond this and describe why they felt so, and what were the implications of their feelings. Social setting is also relevant because the distinctive feature of the novel is presentation of character in a social setting. It has already been established that The Once and Future King lacks a social setting in the sense common to most novels. Nevertheless it is possible to discuss the novelistic presentation of character even if the setting usually necessary to a novel is absent. In The Once and Future King the characterization is one of the most clearly novelistic elements of the work, and the tension between this manner of presentation and the absence of social setting is one of the key features of the book. The following discussion does not attempt a full analysis of all the major characters in The Once and Future King, but examines some representative methods of portrayal and their relations to the conventions of the novel.

In novels, the various means by which character is revealed can function in combination. For example, action and speech may contradict each other to reveal hypocrisy. Other elements can also contribute, such as the symbolic colouring of fair and dark in *Dinah Morris* and *Hetty Sorrel*.¹⁷ These techniques are all present in The Once and Future King and create characters recognisably rooted in the novel tradition.

¹⁷ George Eliot, Adam Bede (1858; London: Zodiac Press, 1967).

White uses speech to reveal character in two ways: by style and content. Style as an indicator of character is mainly used with the minor characters and for comic effect. The Wart's encounter with King Pellinore in the forest illustrates this technique. Pellinore opens the conversation:

"Ah-hah! Whom have we here, what?"

"Please," said the Wart, "I am a boy whose guardian is Sir Ector."

"Charming fellah," said the Knight. "Never met him in me life."

"Can you tell me the way back to his castle?"

"Faintest idea. Stranger in these parts meself."

"I am lost," said the Wart.

"Funny thing that. Now I have been lost for seventeen years.

"Name of King Pellinore," continued the Knight.

"May have heard of me, what?" (p. 16)

Pellinore's speech exhibits a number of eccentric constructions and pronunciations. The grammatical precision of "Whom have we here?" is more appropriate to written language than speech and suggests an exaggerated respect for grammar. Such respect does not, however, extend to the rest of the speech, and Pellinore shows a tendency to omit subjects and verbs, for example "charming fellah" and "funny thing that." The use of "what" as a tail to almost every utterance and the accent suggested by the pronunciations "fellah" and "meself" complete the range of Pellinore's verbal eccentricities. These four deviations from standard English mark Pellinore out as different from other characters. They have a literary ancestry, suggesting the English upper class as presented, for example, by P.G. Wodehouse. Pellinore is a comic character in this tradition. The content of his speech refines the presentation of character: he is confused and

benevolent. Although unable to help the Wart, because he is himself lost, Pellinore is quite willing to assume that Sir Ector, whom he has never met, is a "charming fellah."

Style of speech can also produce comic effects in the more rounded characters. Merlyn, because he is not confined by time, occasionally introduces anachronistic items into his conversation. When Kay has given the Wart a black eye, Merlyn comments: "The discoloration . . . is caused by haemorrhage into the tissues (ecchymosis) and passes from dark purple through green to yellow before it disappears" (p. 84). The Wart is incapable of understanding Merlyn's comment or of using the information even if he could understand it. Merlyn is, however, always willing to pass on information, whether or not it is of any use to his listener. He is not completely a part of the Wart's world; his experience and knowledge extend beyond its boundaries.

Comedy is a vital element in The Once and Future King, but the majority of characters are not merely funny, and their speech reveals other features of characterization. Kay's comments at the beginning of the adventure with Robin Wood, reveal both arrogance and cowardice:

At the edge of the forest Kay said, "I suppose we shall have to go into this?"

"Merlyn said to follow the line."

"Well," said Kay, "I am not afraid. If the adventure was for me, it is bound to be a good one."

(p. 90)

He is also sarcastic, and when the Wart, during the same

adventure, notices a hoof-mark he responds "You don't see much . . . for there is a man" (p. 91). Kay's character is more complex than this direct evidence would suggest and is modified by narrative comment and the response of other characters. He may be both arrogant and cowardly, but the narrator reveals the reasons for this: "He was not at all an unpleasant person really, but clever, quick, proud, passionate and ambitious" (p. 34). Furthermore, the Wart's affection for Kay indicates that the latter is worth the effort of understanding. The Wart says: "I like Kay, you know, and I think people don't understand him. He has to be proud because he is frightened" (p. 86). Obviously, such a comment reveals as much about the Wart as it does about Kay; he is compassionate and, like the narrator, willing to give Kay the benefit of the doubt.

A minor character like Kay is created by a mixture of self-revelatory speech, narrative comment and the comments of other characters. The portrayal of major characters is more complex. The presentation of the Orkney brothers is interesting because throughout most of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" they appear together and their characters are presented in relation to each other. They are initially distinguished in the passage of narrative comment discussed above, which reveals Gareth's sensitivity, Gawaine's loyalty, and Gaheris's tractability, and which simultaneously draws attention to and conceals Agravaine's feeling for his mother. The passage lays the foundation for all their characters

for the rest of the three books. Sometimes they appear as a unity, for example, when they are beating the donkeys (p. 247), so that the distinction of character is balanced against the strong family feeling which binds them. They are distinguished, however, by their behaviour in the unicorn hunt. Gareth, for all his sensitivity and his position as the youngest, refuses to be bullied by Gawaine into fetching a rope; he replies to the command simply "that I will not" (p. 263). When the unicorn has been killed: "Gareth stood square in front of Agravaine, who was three years older than he was and could have knocked him down quite easily" (p. 266). This indicates Gareth's superior moral strength, rather than mere physical bravery. Although sensitive, he is not squeamish: he runs away from the gralloch but then returns to help his brothers. He is not stubborn like Gawaine, but despite his youth he has the strength to stand up for what he believes in. Above all, at this stage, Gareth is loyal to his brothers. Although he hates what they have done to the unicorn he returns to help with it, because it is a joint enterprise. In "The Queen of Air and Darkness" Gareth's loyalty to his family is stressed; he is different from his brothers but not a misfit. Later, when Agravaine kills Lamorak, it is Gareth who goes straight to Arthur to tell him (p. 451). Gareth's rejection of Agravaine, implied in his telling Arthur of the murder, is all the more effective because of his earlier loyalty.

Gawaine and Gareth are further distinguished by

appearance: "they were fair-haired. Gawaine's was bright red and Gareth's whiter than hay" (p. 218). The whole family's fairness emphasizes their northern origin, but for Gawaine and Gareth colouring has a deeper significance. Fair hair is a common symbol of goodness, but Gareth's is extremely fair, suggesting his exceptional qualities. Red hair traditionally indicates a hot temper and this is an important feature of Gawaine's character, shown, for example, in his attack on Agravaine in the store-room:

As Gareth came in, he could see Gawaine's face flaming at Agravaine, under its red hair. It was obvious that he was going to have one of his rages - - but Agravaine was one of those luckless intellectuals who are too proud to give in to brute force. (p. 282)

The brothers are closely linked, but are nevertheless strongly distinguished. Gawaine is governed by passion. Gareth tries to use his understanding to keep the peace between his brothers. Agravaine has a tendency to court trouble, shown later by his insistence, with Mordred, on trying to capture Lancelot and Guenever.

The main elements of the Orkney brothers' characters are fixed in "The Queen of Air and Darkness," and their later actions serve as confirmation. Upon Lancelot's arrival in Camelot, Arthur and Guenever tell him about the "Orkney faction" (p. 345), and the continuing clannishness of the brothers is emphasized in the second chapter of "The Candle in the Wind":

All of them, except Mordred, had wives of their own tucked away somewhere -- but nobody ever saw them. Few saw the men themselves separate for long. There was something childish about them when they were together, which was attractive rather than the reverse. (p. 554)

Later in the same chapter a quarrel occurs which is the parallel of the quarrel in the store-room in "The Queen of Air and Darkness," Chapter IX (pp. 282-3). The later quarrel is more serious because it concerns the betrayal of Lancelot and Guenever, which is the cause of death and disunity among the Orkneys themselves, but the earlier quarrel indicates that the potential for destruction has always been present in their relationships. Arthur's entrance at the end of Chapter II of "The Candle in the Wind" stops the fight (p. 558), but by this stage his presence can guarantee only a façade of peace, disguising deep-seated problems. The Orkney brothers' characters are revealed by constant implicit comparison between them, achieved by a combination of speech, action, and narrative.

The characters of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenever are developed much more in isolation. Arthur's character and its rôle in creating the unity of The Once and Future King was discussed in the Chapter Three. As the only character who appears in all five books, Arthur is built up more slowly and White can rely more on self-revelation than narrative comment. Arthur has a greater measure of personal development than either Lancelot or Guenever, because his progress from childhood to old age is at the centre of the book. He is not

a naturally kingly figure, nor is he brought up to be dignified. The first piece of information given about him is that he has[^] a nickname but that Kay does not because he is "too dignified" (p. 3). Furthermore, the Wart is a "born follower," "a hero worshipper" (p. 8). In "The Sword in the Stone" the direct narrative comment about the Wart tends to undermine any suggestion that he is a suitable person to become king. At the beginning of "The Queen of Air and Darkness," when Arthur has shown no other evidence of his suitability as king, it is possible to have some sympathy with the view that "pulling swords out of stones is not a legal proof of paternity" (p. 229). By the end of the book, however, he has formulated a political creed and shown the strength needed to impose it. The discussion in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" of racial history and the place of might in society reveals Arthur as a conscientious monarch who is trying to understand the situation with which he is faced and respond to it according to moral principles.

In "The Ill-Made Knight" Arthur's character is, to some extent, in retreat, as he tries to come to terms with Lancelot's and Guenever's relationship. The problem cannot be resolved by discussion with Kay or Merlyn, and Arthur is forced to face it alone. The isolation of the king in this situation is illustrated by the dominance of the narrator in explaining how Arthur feels, rather than by Arthur's revealing his feelings in speech and action as in the earlier books. Arthur is one of "the first two people to notice that

Lancelot and Guenever were falling in love with each other" (p. 349). He is certainly not blind, but his reaction could be interpreted as weakness:

Arthur had been warned about this by Merlyn -- who was now safely locked up in his cave by the fickle Nimue -- and he had been fearing it subconsciously. But he always hated knowing the future and had managed to dismiss it from his mind. (p.349)

An alternative analysis of his reaction, that he is trying to understand the lovers' situation, is more in keeping with his character as previously revealed. Such an analysis is given by the narrator later in the book:

Arthur did not know that Lancelot and Guenever were lovers. He had never actually found them together or unearthed proof of their guilt. It was in the nature of his bold mind to hope, in these circumstances, that he would not find them together -- rather than to lay a trap by which to wreck the situation. This is not to say that he was a conniving husband. It is simply that he was hoping to weather the trouble by refusing to become conscious of it. Unconsciously, of course, he knew perfectly well that they were sleeping together -- knew too, unconsciously, that if he were to ask his wife, she would admit it. Her three great virtues were courage, generosity and honesty. So he could not ask her. (p. 407)

That Arthur's reaction and its roots in his character should demand such a long explanation from the narrator indicates the isolation of his situation. Arthur is not given to self-analysis, nor is there anyone with whom he can discuss a problem which he is unwilling to articulate, even to himself. The question of how much Arthur knew is one of the fundamental factors in a presentation of the Arthurian story. White attempts to solve it explicitly, because he is not mainly

concerned with the effect of adultery on the deceived husband. White has chosen to present his characters novelistically, allowing the reader to understand their thoughts and motives, and in this case, direct narration by an omniscient narrator is the most appropriate method open to him, because the character is not naturally introspective and has lost his confidant, Merlyn. The technique is the same as that used by novelists of the mainstream novel tradition, who intervene between character and reader to explain motivation.

Characterization in "The Candle in the Wind" depends more upon dialogue, or a combination of dialogue and narrative comment than in the other books. Arthur, in the final phase of his kingship, is shown to be a gentle and tolerant ruler, as conscious of his own failings as of those of others. In a conversation with Lancelot and Guenever Arthur explains the circumstances of his birth, his relationships with Morgause and with Mordred. The scene emphasizes that Arthur has special qualities which elevate him above even Lancelot. Lancelot's suggestion for solving the problem of Mordred is to "cut the sniveller's head off, and have done with him" (p. 579). Arthur cannot conceive of such an action for two reasons. First he says:

No, I could never think of it! You forget that Mordred is my son. I am fond of him. I have done the boy a great deal of wrong, and my family has somehow always been hurting the Cornwalls, and I couldn't add to the wickedness. Besides, I am his father. I can see myself in him. (p. 580)

Later, he also says:

You must remember I am the King of England. When you are a king you can't go executing people as the fancy takes you. A king is head of his people, and he must stand as an example to them, and do as they wish. (p. 580)

Arthur's personal morality and generosity complement his beliefs, based on long experience, about how a king should govern. The style of dialogue, like the dominant narrative style discussed above, is simple and straightforward. In Arthur's account of his behaviour and dilemma, the grammatical structure reflects the straightforwardness of his morality.

Lancelot and Guenever play a greater part in "The Ill-Made Knight" than does Arthur, and their characters are presented by the techniques already discussed. At the beginning of "The Ill-Made Knight" the spiritual dimension of Lancelot's character is introduced: "he wanted, through his purity and excellence, to be able to perform some ordinary miracle" (p. 335). His religious feelings create a continuous tension with his love for Guenever and he is forced, in the quest for the Holy Grail, to recognize that the two are ultimately incompatible. Lancelot's actions throughout the early part of "The Ill-Made Knight" do not reveal any special spiritual feelings. In quests he is always merciful and never arrogant, obviously admirable characteristics, but they are qualities which Lancelot shares with others, such as Arthur and Gareth. His actions and speech with other knights do not mark Lancelot out as a particularly religious man, and his religious feeling is expressed, therefore, mostly through

narrative comment. The spiritual dimension of his character becomes much more important in the quest for the Holy Grail, and afterwards he tries to explain his experiences to Arthur and Guenever:

Arthur, you mustn't feel that I am rude when I say this. You must remember that I have been away in strange and desert places, sometimes quite alone, sometimes in a boat with nobody but God and the whistling sea. Do you know, that since I have been back with people, I have felt I was going mad? Not from the sea, but from the people. All my gains are slipping away, with the people round me. A lot of the things which you and Jenny say, even, seem to me to be needless: strange noises: empty. (p. 485)

The attempt to explain the Grail is hopeless, and there is therefore, a part of Lancelot which is closed to Arthur and Guenever, and at least misty to the reader. The fact of his making an attempt to explain indicates Lancelot's position between an unattainable spirituality and an unsatisfactory human world. It has been established that Lancelot does not exist in a social setting, and the spiritual element of his character reinforces his social isolation. The techniques of the conventional novel cannot convey Lancelot's spiritual experience, and the tension between the style and the subject reveals the gap between the spirituality of the Grail and the human understanding of Arthur and Guenever. The presentation of the Grail Quest will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven. Characterisation in mainstream novels creates figures who are recognisable as being rooted in reality. Lancelot's failure to convey a spiritual experience to other similarly rooted characters illustrates the gulf between the novelistic and other elements of The Once and Future King.

Of equal importance with the spiritual aspect of Lancelot's character is his love for Guenever. White tends to use direct emotional scenes between the lovers sparingly, so that their feelings for each other are revealed through the narrative rather than through speech. The early development of their love occurs in a gap between two chapters. At the end of Chapter IV of "The Ill-Made Knight" Lancelot's anger at Guenever's clumsiness with the creance reveals to him that she is a real person, independent of the image of her that he had created for himself:

The young man knew, in this moment, that he had hurt a real person, of his own age. He saw in her eyes that she thought he was hateful, and that he had surprised her badly. She had been giving kindness, and he had returned it with unkindness. But the main thing was that she was a real person. She was not a minx, not deceitful, not designing and heartless. She was pretty Jenny who could think and feel. (p. 348)

Chapter V begins "the first two people to notice that Lancelot and Guenever were falling in love with each other were Uncle Dap and King Arthur himself" (p. 349), thus the relationship is to some extent treated as a given fact which exists outside the book. The love between Lancelot and Guenever is treated as common knowledge among the narrator, Malory, and the reader. White uses the love between Lancelot and Guenever as the basis for an exploration of the characters who are affected by it. The descriptions of the lovers have a double perspective in that they are described by the narrator as pre-existing characters in another book, for example:

He had not buried his love for Arthur in his passion for Guenever, but still felt for him. To a medieval

nature like Lancelot's, with its fatal weakness for loving the highest when he saw it, this was a position of pain. (p. 404-5)

The narrator is close enough to the situation to express Lancelot's pain, but the narrator's view is superior to the character's in two ways: the narrator can perceive the whole situation, past, present and future, and he can also place the character in the wider historical context of the Middle Ages. Lancelot is not simply a man in love with his best friend's wife, but he is a medieval man, and for White, that makes a difference. This method of exploring character has an interesting effect. The emotions of the individual are vividly expressed, but the placing of Lancelot in his period gives him a quasi-historical status, and suggests a narrator reporting the feelings of a real person rather than creating a fictional character.

The treatment of Guenever's character in the same chapter shows an even more striking example of the same effect. Her expectation of Elaine's arrival at court is explained by a comparison of Guenever's situation with that of Anna Karenina. The development of character by allusion to another fictional character places Guenever's experience in an established literary tradition. White had few close relationships with women and seems to have felt some difficulty in writing about them.¹⁹ One woman whom he did admire was Ray Garnett and the Russian novelists he read at

¹⁹ Sprague, *passim*.

her suggestion clearly influenced his portrayal of Guenever.¹⁹

White's problems with female characters result in much of the narrative discussion of Guenever's character being hazy and speculative and scattered with tentative phrases, for example, "whatever the explanation of Guenever's attitude.. ." (p. 406). There is a constant sense of searching for an explanation. When presenting the negative features of her character, however, the narrative becomes more definite, for example: "Guenever had overdressed for the occasion. She had put on a make-up which she did not need, and put it on badly. She was forty-two" (p. 483). In preference to a literary model for the character, White has, in this instance, fallen back on a clichéd portrait of a menopausal woman trying to reclaim her youth. This image is confirmed by a comment in "The Candle in the Wind" that "Guenever, and this might have been surprising to a person had known her in her days of tempest, looked sweet and pretty" (p. 575). There is a clear indication in these two sentences that around the age of forty-two Guenever went slightly mad and then recovered. White uses the conventional image in an attempt to reinforce the creation of a complex character, but he does not rely solely on these devices. Sometimes White's use of the tentative approach emphasises the subtleties of the character in a positive way:

One explanation of Guenever, for what it is worth, is that she was what they used to call a "real" person. She was not the kind who can be fitted away

¹⁹ Warner, p. 156.

safely under some label or other, as "loyal" or "disloyal" or "self-sacrificing" or "jealous". Sometimes she was loyal and sometimes she was disloyal. She behaved like herself. And there must have been something in this self, some sincerity of heart, or she would not have held two people like Arthur and Lancelot. Like likes like, they say -- and at least they are certain that her men were generous. She must have been generous too. It is difficult to write about a real person. (p. 497)

The narrator is searching for his "explanation" of a "real person," rather than creating a fictional one. White draws attention to the fact that he is telling a story, but claims that it is a true story, with some clear certainties. He is, however, reluctant to use concrete terms to describe Guenever for fear that they will be interpreted as a simplification of a complex character. The narrative attitude shown to Guenever is, like that shown to Kay, generous in the search for an adequate explanation of awkward facts. White seems to have found an explanation of Guenever's character that satisfied him:

Guenever's central tragedy was that she was childless. Arthur had two illegitimate children, and Lancelot had Galahad. But Guenever -- and she was the one of the three who most ought to have had children, and who would have been best with children, and whom God had seemingly made for breeding lovely children -- she was the one who was left left an empty vessel, a shore without a sea. This was what broke her when she came to the age at which her sea must finally dry. It is what turned her for a time into a raving woman, though that time was still in the future. It may be one of the explanations of her double love -- perhaps she loved Arthur as a father, and Lancelot because of the son she could not have.

(p. 498)

Her childlessness meant that she lacked an occupation: "for

her, unless she felt like a little spinning or embroidery, there was no occupation -- except Lancelot" (p. 498). White is not content to follow Tennyson's example in condemning the "wicked Queen":²⁰

. . . whose disloyal life
Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round.²¹

White recognizes that it would undermine the characters of Arthur and Lancelot if they were to give a lifetime's love to a woman who could be described simply as "wicked." He confesses that she is a difficult character to portray. This may be because of his own lack of understanding, and also because Malory gives few clues to her character compared to those given about her husband and lover. For White the key to her character is that "she gathered her rose-buds while she might, and the striking thing was that she only gathered two of them, which she kept always, and that those two were the best" (p. 498). A woman who was capable of winning and keeping the love of both Arthur and Lancelot must have been both attractive and complex, and White tries to convey the attraction and admit the complexity. Although Guenevere is not such a fully realized character as Arthur or Lancelot, or even the Orkneys, White nevertheless creates a convincing and subtle character.

In general the presentation of character in The Once and

²⁰ Lord Tennyson Poems and Plays (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) "Guinevere," p. 426.

²¹ "Guinevere," p. 427.

Future King tends towards creating sharply individualized figures. Minor characters such as Kay are as clearly individualized as the more important characters. Character revelation by a combination of speech and action is a characteristic of the novel, as is the use of narrative comment and analysis of character. The proportions in which these elements combine depends upon the centrality of the character; major characters are created using all three, but minor ones only one or two. Speech, for example, dominates the development of Pellinore's character, and narrative comment dominates Morgause. White, however, relies heavily on the narrator's analysis of character. Characters are analysed overtly and their origin outside The Once and Future King is emphasised. White claimed that all the characters of The Once and Future King had the same characters as in Malory, so that any particular character exists both within and outside The Once and Future King. Such a situation is unusual in a mainstream novel, where characters are usually confined within the text. The special status of characters who have an existence outside the text, but who can be explained within it, gives the reader a double perspective on character. The reader can not only interpret the character from the evidence of speech and action, comparing that analysis with that given by the narrator, but can also refer to the character as it exists outside the book. With such an approach there is a risk that the distance created by the analysis could cause the reader to lose interest. White on the whole avoids this by combining analysis with direct relation of the characters'

thoughts, so that the narrative moves in and out of the characters' points of view. On the whole then, White creates characters who are individualized, who act consistently, and whose thoughts and feelings are accessible to the reader.

The narrative style and characterization of The Once and Future King are the work's most novelistic features. The intrusive narrator is in the main tradition of the nineteenth-century novel, as practised, for example, by Thackeray. This style of narrative was less common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but has been revived more recently. Therefore, although White may not have been working in the dominant style of his own period, he was working within the mainstream novel's tradition of narrative. White also created his characters according to the tradition of the novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, explaining the reasons for their behaviour. As has been shown, however, other features of The Once and Future King do not conform so closely to the pattern of the novel. The social setting which is so important to the novel is confined to various special sections rather than permeating the whole work. The result is that the characters function almost in a vacuum, but that they do so does not undermine their effectiveness. The importance of characterization in the book makes its debt to the mainstream novel a large one, and it must be read with reference to that tradition.

Chapter Six

Elements of the Historical Novel in White's Arthurian Books

Any discussion of the generic features of the historical novel presents a problem. Its status as a genre can be questioned on the basis that it is insufficiently distinguishable from the mainstream novel tradition. If its generic status is accepted, the historical novel seems to occupy a space between the mainstream novel, historical writing, and romance, and to contain elements of all three. Furthermore, the historical novel is sometimes regarded as a sub-literary form; a kind of popular romantic fiction in fancy dress. Possibly as a result of this view the theory of the historical novel has received little attention in comparison with that given to the mainstream novel, and criticism has tended to concentrate on the relationship between the two.

The Once and Future King is not, as I shall show, an historical novel; it nevertheless uses, or refers to, enough of the generic features of the historical novel to make an understanding of the subgenre a useful interpretative tool. The first task, therefore, is to establish the main features of the subgenre, before examining the way in which White uses, or works against, them in The Once and Future King.

The development of the historical novel is generally agreed to have begun with Sir Walter Scott.¹ It is strange that a subgenre with such a clear origin should prove so intractable. The first major twentieth-century criticism of the historical novel was by Georg Lukács, who regarded genre as "a specific form" which "must be based on a specific truth of life," and went on to ask:

Which facts of life underlie the historical novel and how do they differ from those which give rise to the genre of the novel in general? I believe that when the question is put in this way, there can only be one answer -- none.²

By novel Lukács meant what I have called the mainstream novel, and he argued that it and the historical novel both attempt "the portrayal of a total context of social life, be it present or past, in narrative form."³ Lukács therefore did not accept that the "historical novel" constituted a subgenre separate from the mainstream novel. However, a view of genre that regards the historical novel as a subgenre having some, but not all, the features of the novel plus some additional distinguishing features, can accommodate his position. Lukács values "the authentic reproduction of the

¹ See Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962); Avrom Fleishman, The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971); Mary Lascelles, The Story-Teller Retrieves the Past: Historical Fiction and Fictitious History in the Art of Scott, Stevenson, Kipling and Some Others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Harry E. Shaw, The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and his Successors (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983).

² Lukács, pp. 241 and 242.

³ Lukács, p. 242.

real components of historical necessity over accuracy of detail."⁴ He requires that fiction should reveal the relationship between past and present but not that it should represent current events in the guise of history. The past is not valued for its own sake nor the historical novel as an imaginative attempt to recreate or understand it. Lukács's influential theory is of more value in criticism of the mainstream novel because, although it raises important questions about the relationship between fiction and history, it does not recognize the status of the historical novel as a separate subgenre.

Later critics, whilst recognizing that historical fiction does form a subgenre distinct from the mainstream novel, have also encountered a difficulty in defining it. Avrom Fleishman opens his discussion: "Everyone knows what a historical novel is; perhaps that is why few have volunteered to define it in print."⁵ He regards the distinguishing feature of the historical novel as a specific link with an historical period. Starting from the assumption that the historical novel shares many of the features of the mainstream novel, in particular the creation of a realistic background to the action, it follows that an historical novel must attempt to create a realistic picture of a past period. Fleishman recognizes, however, that such a definition raises almost as many problems as it solves. Firstly, there is

⁴ Lukács, p. 59.

⁵ Fleishman, p. 3.

the problem of realism; the attempt to recreate reality in fiction is hedged about with the difficulties that were discussed in Chapter Four. The difficulties are that much greater when the novel is set in the past, beyond the recall of any living person. Secondly, there is the problem of the nature of historical fact and Fleishman summarizes it thus:

Granting that historical fiction, like all art, tells some kind of truth, it clearly does not tell it straight. By the same token, history itself does not tell truths that are unambiguous or absolute; even the nature of historical fact is problematic. Yet the value and, almost inevitably, the meaning of a historical novel will stand in some relation to the habitual demand for truth, and it is here that a theory of the genre needs to begin.⁶

In his search for a theory of historical fiction, Fleishman attempts to discover the relationship between historical fact and its presentation as historical fiction. Assuming that art tends to the universal, he finds that fiction "retells history in order to make a truer story than has been written by historians, prophets, or other artists" and that it is "pre-eminently suited to telling how individual lives were shaped at specific moments of history, and how this shaping reveals the character of those historical periods."⁷ These features emphasize the similarity between the mainstream novel and the historical novel; both are concerned to present the truth, in its widest sense, through the portrayal of an individual in society. The relationship between the historical novel and the mainstream novel is fundamental to

⁶ Fleishman, p. 4.

⁷ Fleishman, p. 10.

Fleishman's argument and he finds that "in the historical novel, the generic properties of plot, character, setting, thought, and diction (in Scott, even song) operate on the materials of history to lend esthetic form to historical men's experience."⁸ He argues also that as the novel deals primarily with people the historical novel demands "a specific link to history: not merely a real building or a real event but a real person among the fictitious ones."⁹ In this respect the historical novel differs from the mainstream novel which rarely portrays real people. The historical novel uses various generic features to create an image of a past age rather than the present one.

There is more to the historical novel, however, than the creation of a realistic and authentic setting in which real historical figures appear as characters. Fleishman also examines the implications of such a fiction, if it is successfully created:

The historical novelist writes trans-temporally: he is rooted in the history of his own time and yet can conceive another. In ranging back into history he discovers not merely his own origins but his historicity, his existence as a historical being. What makes a historical novel historical is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force -- acting not only upon the characters in the novel but on the author and readers outside it. In the course of reading, we find that the protagonists of such novels confront not only the forces of history in their own time, but its impact on life at any time.¹⁰

⁸ Fleishman, p. 8.

⁹ Fleishman, p. 4.

¹⁰ Fleishman, p. 15.

Harry Shaw finds this view of historical fiction initially attractive, but ultimately unworkable because it gives historical fiction "a cognitive dignity that is unearned" and "quickly slides from defining historical fiction to finding a criterion for 'authentic' historical fiction."¹¹ Shaw, like Lukács and Fleishman, begins from the assumption that the historical novel shares its main features with the novel. Furthermore he confines his discussion to those historical novels which are closest to the mainstream novel, the "standard historical novels," which "share with the standard novel a set of broad cultural assumptions that provide the grounds for their intelligibility and are the ultimate source of their 'realism.'"¹² This terminology implies that there are types of historical novel corresponding to other than the mainstream novel, but Shaw does not pursue this implication. He attaches great weight to probability as a feature of the novel, and interprets it in two ways: there is the kind of probability which involves "fidelity to the external world that a work represents" and another kind which depends "upon how consistently a work follows its own internal rules and patterns."¹³ In Shaw's view historical probability and the conventions of the mainstream novel are the main distinguishing features of historical novels. Like Fleishman, however, he recognizes that they share, with mainstream novels, the problem of the

¹¹ Shaw, p. 26.

¹² Shaw, p. 24.

¹³ Shaw, p. 20-21.

relationship of fiction to reality, and that this problem takes a special form in historical novels in which:

novelists depict ages significantly different from their own and may aspire to present the workings of the historical process itself, they are faced with the task of creating characters who represent social groups and historical trends.¹⁴

The mainstream novel focuses on an individual or individuals and their relationship to contemporary society, but in the historical novel the society must be as carefully constructed as the individual characters. Shaw notes that historical fiction is often criticised for a failure to be mainstream fiction, a problem which is at the heart of genre criticism and one which has affected White's work. The problem arises when a work is interpreted according to the generic prescription of the mainstream novel, instead the special features which distinguish the subgenre. Shaw summarizes the differences between the two:

In standard novels, protagonists are characteristically at the center of things. Milieu, minor characters, and plotted action are there to illuminate them. This formal arrangement has many virtues, but it conflicts with the priorities of historical fiction. Historical fiction often employs characters to represent salient aspects of a historical milieu. In the greatest historical fiction, characters and narrative sequences elucidate historical process. But if historical novels attempt to use plot or milieu primarily for the sake of illuminating individual consciousness or moral choice, they risk blurring their distinctively historical focus.¹⁵

¹⁴ Shaw, p. 30.

¹⁵ Shaw, p. 49.

It is characteristic of the way that genres function that the historical novel can most conveniently be described in contrast to a closely related subgenre.

The theories discussed suggest that historical novels share the principal features of the mainstream novel, as discussed in the previous chapter, and that a definition of historical novels as a subgenre must work at two levels. First the work must exhibit certain formal features such as a setting in a period outside living memory, and a detailed and realistic representation of that setting in terms of physical detail, social custom, language, and thought. Secondly, in order to achieve more than a mainstream novel in fancy dress, the historical novel must also present the broad movement of history. It is not necessary for an historical novel to present historical figures. It may do so, but if the historical figure is at the centre of book the work is moving towards the related genre of historical biography. Nevertheless, historical figures, of greater or lesser importance, do appear in historical novels and provide the wider context in which the fictional characters move. There is a tension between Fleishman's view that the historical novel should, as a generic feature, present history as a shaping force and Shaw's view that only the greatest historical fiction can reveal the historical process. Both value the same quality in historical novels but Fleishman makes the successful presentation of the historical process a generic condition, whilst Shaw regards it admirable but not

necessary to the genre. The formal features of the historical novel must serve as the generic description and the concept of historical process, or history as a shaping force, must be recognized as characteristic only of great historical fiction, in the same way that a mainstream novel can be identified as such even if it is not a great novel.

The discussion of The Once and Future King will address both the formal generic definition, and the wider question of the historical process. It must be borne in mind, however, that a book is as dependent on generic conventions when working against them as it is when fulfilling them. I shall consider the range and accuracy of the historical detail that White uses and show that the setting of The Once and Future King is not confined to a narrow period within the Middle Ages. Although White includes much detail of medieval life, he freely and deliberately introduces anachronisms into the book and obviously this affects the historical consistency of the book. Language often has a special rôle in creating historical effect, therefore White's use of modern language, rather than attempting to recreate a medieval idiom must also be considered. Historical novels are always dependent upon source material, but they vary in the degree to which sources are acknowledged within the text. The relationship between Le Morte Darthur and The Once and Future King is particularly interesting in this context, and I shall show that White taps Malory as an historical, as well as literary, source. An examination of these various features will reveal to what

extent The Once and Future King functions as an historical novel, or works against the conventions of the form, and whether White succeeds in presenting the historical process or invoking "the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force."¹⁶

The social setting of The Once and Future King was discussed briefly in Chapter Four and it was shown that the characters are not integrated with society. The social and historical settings are related but cannot be completely identified. Historical setting consists of the detail of society which is presented to distinguish the world of the book from the reader's world. It can include physical details of cities, buildings, or clothing, and obsolete philosophical or social attitudes. In The Once and Future King the historical setting is much more concretely realised than the social setting and the characters are integrated within it. Before considering the selection and accuracy of the details which comprise the historical setting, however, the narrator's attitude to the setting will be examined.

The narrator of The Once and Future King was found, in Chapter Five, to be more inclined to explain a character's motives than is usual in the mainstream novel. The tendency to explain, rather than simply present is also significant in terms of the historical novel, in that the narrator introduces and explains details about medieval life. For example:

¹⁶ Fleishman, p. 15.

At a military tattoo perhaps, or at some old piece of show-ground pageantry, you may have seen a cavalry charge. If so, you know that "seen" is not the word. It is heard -- the thunder, earth-shake, drum-fire, of the bright and battering sandals!¹⁷ Yes, and even then it is only a cavalry charge you are thinking of, and not a chivalry one. Imagine it now, with the horses twice as heavy as the soft-mouthed hunters of our own midnight pageants, with the men themselves twice heavier on account of arms and shield. (p. 310)

White invites his readers to compare medieval life to modern life in terms of their own experience. This technique is the mainstay of White's use of historical detail. The narrator acts as observer, describing a scene which is outside the direct experience of the readers. The technique emphasizes the strangeness of the fictional period, and no attempt is made to draw the reader into a direct experience of the past. The reader can only approach the same status as the narrator, and enter into the incident as a spectator at an exotic event. Typically, historical novels use a different approach; the narrator mediates between the strangeness of the period and the reader by describing scenes through the eyes of the characters in more detail than would be necessary for a novel with a contemporary setting. The passage quoted above can be compared with the description of a charge in a tournament in Anya Seton's Katherine:

Katherine gave a frightened cry when the forty opposing horses thundered down the field towards her centre loge with the roar of an earthquake. The

¹⁷ Cf. "bright and battering sandal!", "Felix Randal" Gerard Manley Hopkins. Early in his career White had attempted to write a book on Hopkins but it "never got beyond the first joyous chapter of demolishing previous critics," Warner, p. 49-50.

... knightly throats came blood-curdling battle-cries. The shock of their meeting shook the loges, there was a tremendous crash of steel, the cracks of splintering wood and the wild high whinnies of the stallions.¹⁰

The charge is described from Katherine's point of view and it is her experience of the sound and feeling of watching a charge which is communicated to the reader. The novelty of the event is shared by the reader and the character, whose first experience of a tournament it is. The impression created by the two descriptions is similar: both emphasise the noise, movement, light, and vibration experienced by an observer of a charge. White's description, however, bypasses the plot and conveys the charge directly to the the reader, by encouraging an imaginative response based on the reader's own experience. The second approach, by allowing the reader to enter into the experience of a character is more conventional in terms of both the mainstream novel and the historical novel.

In rejecting this approach White separates the narrator from the historical setting. The narrative is overtly placed in the twentieth century and the narrator addresses twentieth-century readers. This approach is most marked in "The Sword in the Stone," for example, when Sir Ector and Sir Grummore are discussing, over a glass of port, the possibility of sending the boys to Eton, the narrator interjects:

It was not really Eton that he mentioned, for the College of Blessed Mary was not founded until 1440,

¹⁰ Anya Seton, Katherine (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954), p. 65.

but it was a place of the same sort. Also they were drinking Metheglyn, not Port, but by mentioning the modern wine it is easier to give you the feel.

(p. 4)

This passage raises a number of issues relating to the narrative attitude to historical fact. A higher priority is clearly given to "giving you the feel" than to historical accuracy. Many historical novelists would share the desire to create a vivid impression of the period. More unusual, however, is the narrator's admission that inaccurate information is being given. It is characteristic both of the intrusive narrative style noted in the previous chapter and of the desire to explain the background of the period in twentieth-century terms. The passage creates the impression of a narrator with a great store of information available, which can be introduced into the book without necessarily advancing the plot. The narrator has more information than the reader could possibly require and he can reveal or withhold it at will. In this respect the narrator is similar to Merlyn and as much a source of anachronism as the magician is. The use of a date is interesting because very few dates are given in The Once and Future King, and this one is not directly relevant to the plot. White's use of dates will be further discussed below. There is a finely balanced attitude to historical fact revealed in this passage; enough respect is given to historical atmosphere to prevent a misleading impression being created, but it is made clear that factual accuracy is not paramount. A further, and perhaps unintentional inaccuracy does, in fact, creep into the

passage. The suggestion that the knights were discussing "a place of the same sort" as Eton, with a view to sending the boys there is an inaccurate representation of medieval educational practice among the aristocracy. Nicholas Orme has shown that usually only those sons of the nobility who were intended for the church attended educational establishments in the Middle Ages and that those expecting to pursue a secular life were educated in noble households.¹⁹

The narrative tone identified in the passage discussed above is strongest in "The Sword in the Stone," of which the projected readership is particularly suited to a didactic approach. White does not simply lecture his readers, however, but encourages them to explore and reconstruct the medieval world. The direct address to the reader, for example, in the description of the Castle of the Forest Sauvage, encourages an imaginative reconstruction of its former state:

You can see the chapel, now quite open to its god, and the windows of the great hall with the solar over it. You can see the shafts of the huge chimneys and how cunningly the side flues were contrived to enter them, and the little private closets now public, and the enormous kitchen. If you are a sensible person, you will spend days there, possibly weeks, working out for yourself by detection which were the stables, which the mews, where were the cow byres, the armoury, the lofts, the well, the smithy, the kennel, the soldiers' quarters, the priest's room, and my lord's and lady's chambers. Then it will all grow about you again. (p. 37-38)

¹⁹ Nicholas Orme, From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy 1066-1530 (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 42-74.

François Gallix has noted the similarity of the narrative style to that of a tour guide at an ancient monument.²⁰ The narrator refuses to take responsibility for the description of the castle as it was; the castle is described as it is now and the reader encouraged to recreate its original state. As a result the reader experiences a closer involvement with the narrative than would be achieved by a simple description by an omniscient narrator. Although character is not used to give the reader an imaginative entry into the historical setting, as in *Katherine*, the reader nevertheless gains that entry, and in addition a perspective of change. White's technique emphasises the difference between the historical period and the readers' own time, but an imaginative entry into a character's experience does not necessarily do so.

The creation of the historical setting with detail supplied by the narrator is proportionally more important in "The Sword in the Stone" than in the later books. There are two reasons for this: first the giving of information is more appropriate to the adult-child relationship which is implied between narrator and reader in "The Sword in the Stone" than to the more equal relationship of the later books, and second, the later books can rely on the historical setting already created in "The Sword in the Stone." The same narrative tone prevails in the later books, but is less dominant.

²⁰ François Gallix, "T.H. White et la légende du Roi Arthur," *Mosaic*, 10, No. 2 (Winter 1977), 47-63.

In "The Queen of Air and Darkness" the narrator, as an outsider, supplies information about Lothian, stressing the strangeness of the culture. The descriptions of the setting given in the opening chapter, emphasize the primitive discomfort of Lothian. For example:

There was a circular room at the top of the tower, curiously uncomfortable. It was draughty. There was a closet on the east side which had a hole in the floor. This hole commanded the outer doors of the tower, of which there were two, and people could drop stones through it when they were besieged.
(p. 217)

and:

The room underneath the story-tellers was lit by a single candle and by the saffron light of its peat fire. It was a poor room for a royal one, but at least it had a bed in it -- the great four-poster which was used as a throne during the daytime. An iron cauldron with three legs was boiling over the fire.
(p. 220)

In the first book the details of setting were used to encourage the reader to appreciate the difference between the modern and medieval world, but in the second book the Castle of the Forest Sauvage has become the norm against which Lothian is implicitly compared. The strangeness of the fictional world of Lothian affects the reader less in a historical context, because Lothian is shown in relation to the Wart's world rather than the reader's. The contrast between Arthur's childhood, and that of his nephews, anticipates the conflict between the two cultures that will find expression at Bedegraine, and ultimately form part of Mordred's motivation. In this instance, therefore, the description of an alien setting, demands less of an effort of historical imagination from the reader. White uses a feature

usually associated with the historical novel, but for a wider effect.

The historical setting in the last two books of The Once and Future King becomes less prominent than in the earlier books and is associated with the absence of social setting noted in the previous chapter. The two chapters describing the state of Arthur's England stand out as islands of historical information, but such concentrated method of describing the period is uncharacteristic of the historical novel. Details of life are usually scattered throughout an historical novel and presented in the context of a particular character's experience; one of many examples in Katherine gives an insight into medieval housekeeping, cookery, and religious custom:

The maids were raking out the floor coverings of stale, matted rushes, and laying down sweet-smelling new ones to last the month. Dame Emma stood over the kitchen fire seething eels and pike in claret to make her famous galantine, for though this was Friday, she saw no reason to keep strict fast, so long as one touched no meat.²¹

In the process of providing background information about medieval life, this passage also adds to the development of a minor character. The various concerns of the historical novelist, the presentation of the physical setting and social context, together with the creation of characters who function in their setting, can all be seen at work here.

²¹ Seton, p. 92.

White rejects this method of presenting medieval life and isolates his characters from the historical and social setting. The historical detail is mainly confined to Chapter XXV of "The Ill-Made Knight" and Chapter III of "The Candle in the Wind." They are arranged to show the improvement which has taken place in England as a result of Arthur's kingship. White includes a remarkable range of historical detail in these chapters, and creates an impression of the Middle Ages as a period of great variety and life.

Both chapters work in two sections; the first presents the brutality of England before Arthur's reign and the second shows the improvement which he has brought. Each section, however, is composed in the same style: the chapters function by juxtaposing a great many details about medieval life with very little appearance of organization or argument except for the basic before-and-after arrangement. Chapter III has a section which revolves around the traffic passing along a road, but the point is to show the variety of people, including a knight, a crusader, a Cistercian lay-brother, a Saxon, a raider, and many others, who could be seen passing by (p. 565). References to real figures, such as Richard Coeur de Lion (p. 562), the Countess of Anjou (p. 563) and the Duke of Berry (p. 561) are found beside characters from The Canterbury Tales (p. 568), and characters of White's own creation, such as the witch (p. 567).

The strength of the two condition-of-England chapters is

in their humour, brief characterisations, and vivid descriptions which prevent them from degenerating into lists of facts. The description of the crusader is typical:

Next, if you wanted some peculiar person to ride by, there might have come a crusader who had promised to deliver the grave of God. You would have expected the cross on his surcoat, no doubt, but you might not have realized that he was so delighted with the whole affair that he put the same symbol almost everywhere that it could be made to go. Like a new Boy Scout, transported with enthusiasm, he would have stuck the cross on his escutcheon, on his coat, on his helm, on his saddle, and on the horse's curb.
(p. 565)

White has an eye for detail and presents it in a humorous way, and the comparison with the twentieth-century boy scout contributes to the humour. Once again the reader is drawn into the description as observer; the anonymous crusader is not sufficiently developed as an individual to engage sympathy or interest, but functions as a representative figure in a pageant. The direct form of address emphasises the link between reader and narrator in a partnership which bypasses the characters. Chapter III of "The Candle in the Wind" is framed by Lancelot and Guenever looking out of a window over the country. They do not figure in the description, however, and it does not present their response to the condition of the country. Once again a direct link is established between narrator and reader, who is addressed throughout as "you." The same form of address is used in Chapter XXV of "The Ill-Made Knight."

The separation of historical information into special

chapters is totally uncharacteristic of the historical novel. Only rarely does some additional detail about, for example, chivalry and falconry, appear in the course of the narrative. The scene for Ector Degalis's discovery of Lancelot is set by a description of the tilt-yard, it "was a long, sanded passage between the walls, with a tower at each end. It had galleries looking down on it from the wall, like a raquets court, and was open to the sky" (p. 434). Again the introduction of a modern comparison is typical of White's approach to historical information. Equally untypical of the historical novel is the acknowledgment of historical sources which White makes, for example: "Children, Duruy tells us, had been seen hanging in the trees, by the sinews of their thighs" (p. 444) and "This, at all events, is what Ingulf of Croyland used to tell us, until he was discovered to be a forgery" (p. 560).

The method of presenting historical information becomes less related to the conventions of the historical novel as The Once and Future King progresses. In "The Sword in the Stone" details of medieval life are incorporated, to some extent, in the narration of incident, such as the account of the boar hunt (pp. 142-45), although there are passages devoted solely to a description of historical setting, for example, the description of the castle (pp.36-38). In the later books the separation becomes progressively more marked, as the focus of the book turns inward to the experiences of the three main characters. Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenever are faced with an irreconcilable conflict of interests, and the decrease in

historical emphasis suggests that their experiences are not bound by historical limits.

The Once and Future King is remarkable for its range and variety of concrete historical detail. Information is given about arms and armour, hawking, hunting, architecture, and many other aspects of medieval life. There is no doubt that the list reflects White's own interest in, and experience of bloodsports.²² The information is a combination of knowledge which White had gained in following his own interests and in researching into the Middle Ages specifically for The Once and Future King.²³ For example, Sylvia Townsend Warner quotes a letter to Sydney Cockerell in which White asks for information about armour.²⁴

Hunting, hawking and knightly exercise are particularly important in "The Sword in the Stone" where they form part of the boys' education. The didactic introduction of the subjects parallels the Wart's and Kay's experience. The opening of "The Sword in the Stone" indicates the

²² White was a keen participant in bloodsports. See Warner passim, and White's own works: Earth Stopped (London: Collins, 1934), Gone to Ground (London: Collins, 1935), England Have My Bones (London: Collins, 1936) and Burke's Steerage (London: Collins, 1938).

²³ For example The Goshawk (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951) is White's account of his attempt to train a hawk by medieval methods. Although not published until 1951, the book is based on White's experience of training goshawks between 1936 and 1938.

²⁴ Warner, p. 126.

importance of the theme of education, and the role of a knight is a key element in Sir Ector's view of education, although Merlyn does not agree:

I believe Sir Ector would have been gladder to get a by-our-lady tilting blue for your tutor, that swings himself along on his knuckles like an anthropoid ape, rather than a magician of known probity and international reputation with first-class honours from every European university. (p. 55)

An even stronger emphasis is given to training for knighthood at the beginning of "The Ill-Made Knight," and Lancelot's dedication to becoming a great knight is the vehicle for information about the method of training used. For example, practice with the pel-quintain:

It was a stake driven upright into the ground, and he had to fight against it with sword and shield -- rather like shadow boxing, or using a punch ball. He had to use arms for this exercise which weighed twice as much as the ordinary sword and shield. Sixty pounds was considered a good weight for arms used on the pel-quintain -- so that, when he did come at length to the usual weapons, he would wield them featly. (p. 333)

Nicholas Orme stresses the importance of military training in the education of the medieval nobility, and mentions the quintain and the use of heavy weapons as training techniques.²⁵

Learning to be a knight is the main feature of Lancelot's education, but a much more rounded curriculum is offered to the Wart. He and Kay learn to joust, and Merlyn enables the Wart to see the joust between King Pellinore and Sir Grummore

²⁵ Orme, p. 188.

in Chapter VII of "The Sword in the Stone," as an additional part of his education. The chapter opens with an account of some of the main points of tilting, emphasising the complex nature of the subject which the boys must master. The reader is addressed directly throughout, for example:

It was not until the actual moment of striking that you clamped your knees into the horse's sides, threw your weight forward in your seat, clutched the lance with the whole hand instead of with the finger and thumb, and hugged your right elbow to your side to support the butt. (p. 53)

This approach encourages imaginative participation without involving the main character, who as a novice has no experience of serious jousting to share with the reader. In describing jousting, one aim of the Wart's conventional education is presented, and it is possible to share the character's ambitions and interests in the subject although he is only at the stage of "making bosh shots at the quintain" (pp. 54-55). White describes the theory of tilting, and then gives the Wart a practical demonstration in the joust between King Pellinore and Sir Grummore, of which the reader shares the boy's perspective as observer. The account of the joust undercuts the serious and informative tone of the first part of the chapter as the knights engage in a parody of the kind of jousting that Malory describes.

Hunting was also a valued part of medieval aristocratic education because it taught "horsemanship, the management of weapons, knowledge of terrain, woodcraft and strategy -- techniques which are very close to those of

war."²⁶ Its inclusion in "The Sword in the Stone" is, therefore, historically accurate, but it also reflects White's own interest in bloodsports. The boar hunt is one of ^{the} finest passages in "The Sword in the Stone" and fulfils one of Fleishman's generic requirements for the historical novel, in that a historical character appears in it. William Twiti was huntsman to Edward II, and wrote a treatise, The Art of Hunting,²⁷ which is the source for many of the terms White uses in the boar hunt. A little of Twiti's life is known, aside from his authorship of The Art of Hunting; for example, he was sent by the king in July 1322 "to the forests chases and parks of Thomas, late Earl of Lancaster, in the said county, to take fat venison, with a lardener, two berners, four ventrers, a page, twenty greyhounds and four harthounds."²⁸ It is probable that White took the idea for Twyti's visit to the Forest Sauvage ^{from} the visit to the late Earl's estates. He elaborates on a historical fact by portraying the feelings of the participants in the hunt. He invests Sir Ector with the emotions of provincial Master of Fox Hounds whose arrangements are to be subject to the scrutiny of a famous huntsman:

He feared that his coverts would be disturbed by a lot of wild royal retainers -- never know what these city chaps will be up to next -- and that the King's huntsman, this fellow Twyti, would sneer at his humble hunting establishment, unsettle the hunt

²⁶ Orme, p. 191.

²⁷ William Twiti, The Art of Hunting, ed. Bror Danielsson, Stockholm Studies in English, No. 37 (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wicksell, 1977).

²⁸ Danielsson, ed. The Art of Hunting, p. 34.

servants and perhaps even try to interfere with his own kennel management. (p. 132)

Sir Ector's nervous anticipation of the event builds up the tension, which is released by the character White creates for Twyti. He is not a romantic figure, but a complete professional: "All his life he had been forced to pursue various animals for the royal table, and, when he had caught them, to cut them up into the proper joints. He was more than half a butcher" (p. 142). White creates a character for whom hunting is not a social activity with no practical purpose, like his own experience of fox-hunting, but a skilled job, carried out under the pressure of need to feed the royal household. Twyti is not excited by the prospect of the boar hunt, as are the occupants of the Castle of the Forest Sauvage, but he is not regardless of its danger. White also invests the character with a past; "He had been slashed sixteen times by mighty boars" (p. 142), so that he is more than a device on which to hang a boar hunt. The most distinctive feature of Twyti's character, however, is his obsession with the hare:

Mention a hare to Master Twyti and, although he would still go on galloping after the wretched hart which seemed to be his destiny, he would gallop with one eye over his shoulder yearning for puss. It was the only thing he ever talked about. He was always being sent to one castle or another, all over England, and when he was there the local servants would fête him and keep his glass filled and ask him about his greatest hunts. He would answer distractedly in monosyllables. But if anybody mentioned a huske of hares he was all attention, and then he would thump his glass upon the table and discourse upon the marvels of this astonishing beasts, declaring that you could never blow a menea for it, because the same hare could at one time be male and another time female, while it carried

grease and croteyed and gnawed, which things no
beast in the earth did except it. (p. 143)

The account of the marvellous qualities of the hare is taken
directly from The Art of Hunting:

For as miche as he beripe grese and crotyth and
rongith, and so doþe no beste in þis land but he.
And somme tyme he is male and summe female, and for
þat cause a man may not blowe meene of hym as men
don of oþer bestes.²⁹

White interprets this account as a personal obsession of the
author and uses it as a base for his fictionalised Twyti. The
introduction of historical source material into fiction is
typical of the historical novel, as is the use of a historical
figure in a minor role. Historical figures do sometimes
occupy major roles in historical fiction, for example, John of
Gaunt in Katherine, but the exceptional nature of such
characters normally prevents the parts of the work in which
they appear from presenting typical aspects of life at the
time. Twyti, however, is an obscure figure, whose
professional expertise has been preserved in his book. White
uses his book as a basis for his character, and as a
source for the correct terminology of the boar hunt. The
terms "os and argos, suet and grease, croteys, fewmets and
fiants" (p. 142) are all found in The Art of Hunting.

Twyti's attitude to his hounds also seems to be suggested
by The Art of Hunting. The vocabulary that he uses when
talking to his fatally injured dog, Beaumont, is taken from

²⁹ Twiti, p. 40.

the book, as is the dog's name. Beaumont, in The Art of Hunting, is a hound engaged in hunting the hare, and Twiti writes that he should be encouraged thus: "Oyez, a Bemound le vaylaunt" and "sy douce amy, sy vailaunt."³⁰ White's Twyti distracts the injured hound with the words: "Hark to Beaumont. Softly, Beaumont, mon amy. Oyez à Beaumont the valiant. Swef, le douce Beaumont, swef,swef," while Robin Wood kills the dog (pp. 150-1).

The historical detail of the hunt is also used for comic effect. For example, Pellinore breaches hunting etiquette by asking when the hounds would be given their quarry:

Now, as everybody knows, a quarry is a reward of entrails, etc., which is given to the hounds on the hide of the dead beast (sur le quir), and, as everybody else knows, a slain boar is not skinned. It is disembowelled without the hide being taken off, and, since there can be no hide, there can be no quarry. We all know that the hounds are rewarded with a fouail, or mixture of bowels and bread cooked over a fire, and, of course, poor King Pellinore had used the wrong word. (p. 151)

The incident illustrates how precise the terminology of medieval hunting was,³¹ but also injects a lighter tone into the episode as a contrast to the tension of the chase and the death of Beaumont. White employs his characteristic technique of drawing the reader into the action, in this case almost in a conspiracy against Pellinore. It is, of course, very unlikely that the reader knows the difference between a quarry

³⁰ Twiti, p. 45.

³¹ Cf. Malory VIII 3.

and a fouail, but the use of phrases such as "everybody knows" evokes the atmosphere of an event at which knowledge of the correct procedure is socially necessary. The embarrassment of the individual who makes the mistake is the cause of amusement in those who do not, and the reader is enlisted with those who remember the correct terminology.

Similar to White's use of Twiti's book is his use of the twelfth-century Latin bestiary which he translated. The book that the Orkney brothers examine when seeking information about the unicorn is a "Bestiary called Liber de Natura Quorundam Animalium" (p. 261). The boys pass over a number of animals all of which are described in The Book of Beasts:

In vain for their eager glances did the Antalop rub its complicated horns against the tamarisk tree -- thus, entangled, becoming a prey to its hunters -- in vain did the Bonnacon emit its flatulence in order to baffle the pursuers. The Peridexions, sitting on trees which made them immune to dragons, sat unnoticed. The Panther blew out his fragrant breath, which attracted his prey, without interest for them. (p. 261)³²

The introduction of the bestiary achieves various ends. Looking for a unicorn in a work of reference implies that it is a real, rather than a mythical creature. That reality is extended by implication to include the other strange animals that appear in The Once and Future King, such as the Questing Beast and Morgan le Fay's guard-griffin. Finally, the reference to the bestiary allows White to include a subject that fascinated him, so much so that he spent about fifteen

³² Cf. White, trans. The Book of Beasts (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), pp. 18-19, 33, 159-61, 14-17.

years working intermittently on his translation.

Historical ideas, in contrast to concrete details, are introduced for the first time in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" with the discussion of the concept of war. White moves away from the descriptive approach used to create the physical settings and dialogue becomes more important. Arthur's conferences with Merlyn, Kay, and Sir Ector are explorations of the problem of might, but they are not totally contained within the medieval framework. The discussions stem from the situation in which Arthur finds himself; the victor of one war and faced with another, but their scope is widened to include war in general. The first discussion about the conduct of a war in which only the footsoldiers are injured while their commanders emerge relatively unscathed is specifically medieval in context. The medieval method of conducting war is described in a conversation between Merlyn and Arthur:

You have become the king of a domain in which the popular agitators hate each other for racial reasons, while the nobility fight each other for fun, and neither the racial maniac nor the overlord stops to consider the lot of the common soldier, who is the one person that gets hurt. (p. 240)

Merlyn then persuades Arthur to compare his experience of warfare with that of the footsoldier and relies upon his innate compassion to achieve the desired result. Arthur is made to think unlike a medieval king and to place human life above military necessity. His examination of the morality of warfare is based on twentieth-century ideas, introduced by

Merlyn, whose a-temporal perspective allows him to criticise medieval warfare in a way which is beyond Arthur's and Kay's understanding until Merlyn explains it to them. Historical novels which are totally consistent in their presentation of period in terms of ideas and attitudes, as well as physical detail, cannot criticize the standards of their fictional world in the same way. Alfred Duggan's The Little Emperors,³³ for example, is a portrait of the end of Roman rule in Britain, and presents the brutality of that phase of history, rather than commenting explicitly on it. Duggan creates an internally consistent world and allows readers to respond with the values of their own time. Novelists who want to comment explicitly on the values of their fictional times must find another means of doing so. John Fowles's narrator in The French Lieutenant's Woman exists in the late twentieth century, and therefore has an historical perspective on the characters who are moulded by ideas of their own time. He comments, for example, that "Charles called himself a Darwinist."³⁴ White achieves a similar effect through Merlyn's anachronistic comments and the narrator's explanations of the medieval world.

One of the most important ideas given a specifically historical context in The Once and Future King is religion, particularly in connection with Lancelot. Religion is first

³³ Alfred Duggan, The Little Emperors (London: Faber and Faber, 1951).

³⁴ John Fowles, The French Lieutenant's Woman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 53.

mentioned, however, in "The Sword in the Stone," when the villagers' church-going habits are described:

The villagers went to church in the chapel of the castle. They wore their best clothes and trooped up the street with their most respectable gait on Sundays, looking with vague and dignified looks in all directions, as if reluctant to disclose their destination, and on week-days they came to Mass and vespers in their ordinary clothes, walking much more cheerfully. Everybody went to church in those days, and liked it. (p. 36)

Religion is a part of everyday life and most characters take it for granted. It is important to them but they do not think about it very much. Lancelot, however, is different: his religious beliefs and feelings are exceptional, but at the same time, distinctively medieval. Lancelot's special spiritual quality is introduced at the end of Chapter II of "The Ill-Made Knight: "he wanted one other thing which was still possible in those days. He wanted, through his purity and excellence, to be able to perform some ordinary miracle -- to heal a blind man or something like that, for instance" (p. 335). Lancelot's religious faith is fundamental to his character and for White it makes him superior to to modern people:

It is almost impossible to explain about Lancelot. At least it would be impossible nowadays, when everybody is so free from superstitions and prejudice that it is only necessary for all of us to do as we please. Why did not Lancelot make love to Guenever, or run away with his hero's wife altogether, as any enlightened man would do today?

One reason for his dilemma was that he was a Christian. The modern world is apt to forget that several people were Christians in the remote past, and in Lancelot's time there were no Protestants -- except John Scotus Erigena. His Church, in which he had been brought up -- and it is difficult to escape

from your upbringing -- directly forbade him to
seduce his best friend's wife. (p. 383)

Christianity is given as the main reason why Lancelot does not run away with Guenever and it is, therefore, close to the heart of Arthur's tragedy. It is also the main distinguishing feature which separates Lancelot from the modern world. White emphasizes the difference between past and present in terms of the influence which Christianity has on individuals. In White's medieval world it is a pervasive force and Lancelot responds to it with particular intensity. White suggests that because Christianity no longer has the widespread power which it had in the Middle Ages, Lancelot's behaviour is not comprehensible to modern people. The problem of Lancelot as a character in an historical novel is that he must be both typically and exceptionally religious at the same time.

The passage quoted above from "The Sword in the Stone" (p. 36) suggests that religious observance was a natural part of everyday life for everyone, and the religious life of most characters is not specifically presented. Arthur is never shown engaged in any religious devotion and Guenever is said to be a "good theologian, like most women" (p. 490), implying an intellectual rather than a spiritual approach to religion. Lancelot is typical of his time in that religion is naturally a part of his life, but exceptional in the strength of his devotion to God. For Lancelot "God was a real person" (p. 509) and his love for God conflicts with his love for Guenever. Lancelot's spiritual life is shown to be

exceptional by medieval standards in that he is allowed to perform two miracles, although he cannot achieve the Grail. He is thus marked out as a person of exceptional spiritual achievement, confirmed by the Odour of Sanctity which accompanies his death (The Book of Merlyn p. 133). White rarely touches on theology, even in the Grail Quest: throughout The Once and Future King the emphasis is on the emotional nature of Lancelot's commitment to God and his struggle to be worthy. Lancelot aspires to a single-minded devotion to God which Guenever obstructs. White gives to his religious feeling the form of love for a person because it is recognizable to a modern readership and emphasises his reservations about the ability of twentieth-century people to appreciate religious devotion:

It was almost as if he had been confronted with a choice between Jane and Janet -- and as if he had gone to Janet, not because he was afraid she would punish him if he stayed with Jane, but because he felt, with warmth and pity, that he loved her best. He may even have felt that God needed him more than Guenever did. This was the problem, an emotional rather than a moral one. (p. 510)

Even in the realms of spiritual experience White presents a character's situation in terms which he expects the reader to understand. Rather than attempt a portrait of a spiritual conflict between religious and human love, he compares Lancelot's problem to something familiar. The technique is the same as that of comparing metheglyn to port.

Christianity, for White, is a special feature of the past, and Lancelot's religious feelings are an historical

feature which separates the character from modern readers. The comment that "the modern world is apt to forget that several people were Christians in the remote past" (p. 383) anticipates the peevish tone of The Book of Merlyn which is one of the least attractive features of White's writing. It suggests that, at worst, the modern world is irredeemably inferior to the medieval world, and that at best the superior religious morality of medieval man must be explained to a society which has become estranged from its moral and religious roots. Religion is not necessarily a subject which reveals the changes between one historical period and another, but White chooses to make it so, particularly in the case of Lancelot, who is a focus of the difference between past and present. Lancelot's religious experience is shown to be so remote from modern understanding that White needs to compare it to another kind of experience to make it intelligible to a modern reader.

Although The Once and Future King is clearly set in the Middle Ages, it is impossible to pin the setting down to a particular period. An historical novel is usually set in a very specific period, in which historical events and dates function as reference points for the fictional events. Katherine, for example, is divided into six parts which are named only by the years they chronicle, and The French Lieutenant's Woman is dated with precision to "a morning in the late March of 1867."³⁵ White inverts this expectation by

³⁵ Fowles, p. 9.

using dates and historical characters to emphasise the fictional nature of the book. White intended to set his book in Malory's period:

I am following Malory in assuming that King Arthur lived at the same time as himself. He thought of the Round Table as a contemporary -- just as Shakespeare dressed Caesar or Macbeth in armour -- and so I am assuming the Arthur dates to be second half of 15th century.³⁶

It will be shown, however, that White did not fulfil this intention entirely consistently. This inconsistency has important implications for his general attitude to history, and is one of the most attractive features of the book.

At the beginning of "The Sword in the Stone" it is implied that the action takes place before 1440, "it was not really Eton that he mentioned, for the College of Blessed Mary was not founded until 1440" (p. 4). At the end of the same book when the news of Uther Pendragon's death reaches the Castle of the Forest Sauvage, King Pellinore announces "Uther the Conqueror, 1066-1216" (p. 198). In White's fictional Middle Ages Uther's one hundred and fifty year reign obviously does not correspond to the reign of any single historical king, and his having such a lengthy reign makes Uther seem larger than life. Referring to him as "Uther the Conqueror" does not equate him with William I, but places him in the tradition of Norman kingship. The dates and other markers used are not arbitrary, however. Uther represents the early Middle Ages, which White characterises thus: "the World had

³⁶ Warner, p. 126.

been expected to end in the year one thousand, and, in the reaction which followed its reprieve, there had been a burst of lawlessness and brutality which had sickened Europe for centuries" (p. 444). Uther stands for this early period of reaction and for the domination of one race by another. Uther's values are appropriate to his period but Arthur must learn new ones. Arthur's reign apparently begins in 1216, the year after Magna Carta, and extends into the fifteenth century, when in Mordred's assault on the Tower of London cannon are used³⁷ (p. 658) and in the final chapter Thomas Malory appears (p. 671-5). Both events belong to the fifteenth century and suggest that Arthur outstripped his father in the length of his reign.

The use of dates indicates that the setting of the book is not confined to a narrow historical period. It is not confined to the lifetime of a single character, as Katherine is, or like Ivanhoe set "in a period towards the end of the reign of Richard I."³⁸ The Once and Future King rejects one of the fundamental features of the historical novel, that it should represent a specific period in history, in accurate detail. If the specific period is rejected, then the accuracy of the detail cannot be judged by historical standards. The way is thus open for the use of anachronism which will be discussed further below.

³⁷ Charles Oman, A History of War in the Middle Ages, 2nd ed. (1924; London: Methuen 1898), II, pp. 215-227 on the use of cannon in medieval warfare.

³⁸ Sir Walter Scott, Ivanhoe (London: John C. Nimmo, 1893), p. 1.

The rejection of the norms of the historical novel goes further than a refusal to set the book in a narrow period or a single lifetime. The history of medieval royalty is acknowledged and rejected in The Once and Future King with references to "mythological families such as Plantagenets, Capets and so forth" and "legendary kings like John" (p. 560). The Once and Future King creates an alternative history of the Middle Ages and claims for itself a greater truth than the generally accepted history of the time. Alternative histories are the non-~~ve~~ⁱsimilar counterpart to historical novels.ⁱ The Once and Future King is, however, not typical of alternative history because it makes reference to the known facts of history, admittedly to discount them, whereas it is more common to ignore them. White, however, uses historical dates and refers to historical characters to deny their historicity and to claim, although not seriously, that his book is historical truth. He simultaneously embraces and rejects known history and is thus free to pick and choose those historical events and characters which fit in with his version of the Middle Ages.

The rejection of historical limits allows White to present Arthur as the architect of medieval civilisation in its movement away from barbarism and towards the Renaissance, an achievement clearly beyond the lifespan of a normal individual. Arthur does not, however, appear as superhuman or enjoy unnatural longevity. He is an ordinary human being who lives a natural life span. The references to "legendary

kings" and historical events are relatively few so that the idea of Arthur's reign spanning the whole of the Middle Ages is not kept constantly before the reader. Arthur gains the reader's sympathy because he is a human individual trying to accomplish certain things in his limited life span. The accuracy with which the period setting is presented is not as important to the work's success as it is in conventional historical novels because the rejection of historical confinement allows White to introduce elements from opposite ends of the Middle Ages.

The flexibility of period allows White to introduce detail from any period of the Middle Ages without damaging the authenticity of the setting. The Castle of the Forest Sauvage, for example, is a concentric castle of a design similar to Beaumaris Castle. The main features of the Castle of the Forest Sauvage are its "twelve round towers" which "stuck out from the wall into the moat, so that the archers could shoot in all directions and command every part of the wall" (p. 36), "the stone part of the drawbridge with its barbican and the bartizans of the gatehouse," and the "inner shell-keep, with its eight enormous round towers" (p.37). Such features are similar to those of Beaumaris which:

consists of two symmetrical enclosing walls, of which the inner, forming the castle proper, is of course by far the stronger. Both make the utmost use of flanking towers, the narrow lists between them being entirely dominated by the great drum towers and gatehouses of the inner ward.³⁹

³⁹ R. Allen Brown, English Medieval Castles (London: Batsford, 1954), p. 76

This is not to suggest that the Castle of the Forest Sauvage is modelled on Beaumaris Castle, but rather that White described a castle of the most sophisticated medieval design. Beaumaris is recognized as such by R. Allen Brown, who wrote: "Edward I's castles in Wales . . . provide some of the most splendid examples of concentric fortresses to be found. Amongst them Beaumaris is beyond doubt the finest."⁴⁰ Beaumaris Castle, although never completed, was constructed between 1295 and the 1320s.⁴¹ The Castle of the Forest Sauvage is, however, complete and functioning in the early 1200s, assuming that Arthur comes to the throne in 1216.

A further dislocation of time occurs with detail taken from Twiti's The Art of Hunting which dates from the early fourteenth century, but is used by White in an episode in the Wart's childhood. Much of the detail about armour is from the fifteenth century; in his letter to Sydney Cockerell, referred to above, White asks for information about the armour of his chosen period.⁴² White clearly allowed himself more latitude with dates than his letter to Cockerell would suggest, and the use of detail from such a variety of periods subverts the conventions of the historical novel. In The Once and Future King the detail creates an impression of the whole of Middle Ages as teeming with life, ideas, and

⁴⁰ Brown, p. 76.

⁴¹ R. Allen Brown, H.M. Colvin & A.J. Taylor, The History of the Kings Works: Vol I The Middle Ages (London: H.M.S.O., 1963), pp. 395-405.

⁴² Warner, p. 126-7.

invention. The examples quoted are also examples of excellence within a particular field: the Castle of the Forest Sauvage exemplifies the finest concentric castles; William Twiti, as the King's Huntsman, was presumably the best huntsman of his day; and fifteenth-century armour represents the high point in the development of armour before it was rendered obsolete by firearms. White's choice of detail supports his view of the Middle Ages as inventive and technologically competent. Although The Once and Future King does not recreate an historical period in the manner of an historical novel, the use of the conventions of the historical novel, such as dates, historical figures, and historical detail, is a vital element in the effectiveness of the book.

The historical setting of The Once and Future King is expanded beyond the normal compass of the historical novel to take in the whole of the Middle Ages. In some respects it goes beyond even these boundaries and is scattered with anachronistic ideas and references. It has already been shown in various contexts that White compares aspects of medieval life to twentieth-century examples in order to realize them more vividly, for example, the comparison of metheglyn to port, or boar hunting to beagling. It is rare in historical novels to find explicit comparisons between the fictional period and the writer's own time. Books that make such comparisons challenge the conventions of the form. One such is The French Lieutenant's Woman in which there are a number

of references to the gap between the date at which the novel is set, 1867, and the date of its composition, 1969. For example:

She was a ploughman's daughter, fourth of eleven children who lived with their parents in a poverty too bitter to describe, her home a damp, cramped, two-room cottage in one of those valleys that radiates west from bleak Eggardon. A fashionable young London architect now has the place and comes there for week-ends, and loves it, so wild, so out-of-the-way, so picturesquely rural; and perhaps this exorcizes the Victorian horrors that took place there.⁴³

The contrast between the nineteenth- and late twentieth-century uses of the house reveals certain changes which have taken place in the rural England during that time. The passage shows the sum of change rather than the process and so emphasizes the difference between then and now. Throughout the book Fowles presents the past as past, rather than creating a fictional present shared by the narrator and characters, from which the reader is excluded. The comparisons are made explicit by the narrator who contrasts his own historical perspective with the characters' limitations, for example:

Needless to say, Charles knew nothing of the beavered German Jew quietly working, as it so happened, that very afternoon in the British Museum library; and whose work in those sombre walls was to bear such bright red fruit. Had you described that fruit, or the subsequent effects of its later indiscriminate consumption, Charles would almost certainly not have believed you.⁴⁴

⁴³ Fowles, p. 155.

⁴⁴ Fowles, p. 18

White's technique is not confined to narrative comment. Merlyn is another focus of anachronism in the book because his living backwards has allowed him to experience both the modern and medieval periods. His explicit comparisons and his confusion lead the reader to make further comparisons between the periods. There are two kinds of anachronism in The Once and Future King, one concerned with objects, and one with ideas. Anachronism of objects is often used for comic purposes, and is invariably associated with Merlyn, for example, the description of Merlyn's bedroom and study containing among other things "a fox's mask, with GRAFTON, BUCKINGHAM TO DAVENTRY, 2 HRS 20 MINS written under it" (p. 24), "a guncase with all sorts of weapons which would not be invented for half a thousand years," "the Encyclopaedia Britannica," "bunsen burners," and "a complete set of cigarette cards depicting wildfowl by Peter Scott" (p. 25). One source of the comedy is the diversity of Merlyn's interests, which results in such a large and oddly assorted collection of objects housed in an upstairs room occupying half the floor space of a "snug cottage" (p. 22). It is also an indication that Merlyn is not bound by time in the way that other characters are. His position as a focus of anachronism is bound up with the narrator's ability to stand outside literary time. Merlyn and the narrator share knowledge of a world and time outside the book, which is closed to the other characters.

Merlyn finds living backwards a problem because "all

one's tenses get muddled, for one thing" (p. 29). Furthermore, the service given by his supernatural assistant is adversely affected. For example, when Merlyn has lost his hat during his accidental visit to Bermuda, he has some difficulty in retrieving the correct hat:

The Wart sat quiet while Merlyn closed his eyes and began to mutter to himself. Presently a curious black cylindrical hat appeared on his head. It was a topper.

Merlyn examined it with a look of disgust, said bitterly, "And they call this service!" and handed it back to the air. Finally he stood up in a passion and exclaimed, "Come here!"

The Wart and Archimedes looked at each other, wondering which was meant -- Archimedes had been sitting all the while on the window-sill and looking at the view, for, of course, he never left his master -- but Merlyn did not pay them any attention.

"Now," said Merlyn furiously, apparently to nobody, "do you think you are being funny?"

"Very well then, why do you do it?"

"That is no excuse. Naturally I meant the one I was wearing.

"But wearing now, of course, you fool. I don't want a hat I was wearing in 1890. Have you no sense of time at all?"

Merlyn took off the sailor hat which had just appeared and held it out to the air for inspection.

"This is an anachronism," he said severely. "That's what it is, a beastly anachronism." (p. 87)

Here White subverts the usual features of the historical novel, in which anachronism is carefully avoided. In a conventional historical novel, such as Katherine, it would not be appropriate for the narrator to refer to an object or an idea from outside the temporal confines of the novel, much less to allow a character to do so. The comedy of Merlyn's temporal problems is more effective because it contradicts the norms of the conventional historical novel.

In "The Sword in the Stone" anachronism used for comedy is not confined to Merlyn. The characterizations of Sir Ector, King Pellinore, and Sir Grummore make few concessions to the Middle Ages and all three behave like late nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century country squires. They have a literary ancestry which lies somewhere between R.S. Surtees and P.G. Wodehouse. Much of the characterization depends on their language, which is discussed further below, but their attitudes and opinions do not belong to the Middle Ages either. When Merlyn arranges a joust between Pellinore and Grummore their behaviour is governed less by any medieval code than by that of the public school, although neither is above cheating. Mark Girouard has shown the links between the standards of behaviour advocated by Victorian public schools and the Victorian interest in chivalry.⁴⁵ White also makes this link by making Pellinore and Grummore express themselves in public school rather than medieval language. When Grummore arrives he is singing his school song (p. 59) and during the encounter they call each other "cad" (p. 64-5), "cheat" (p. 66), and "beastly bully" (p. 66). White has created typical characters who are more immediately recognizable to his reader because they are based on nineteenth- and twentieth-century types. The comic effect of these figures depends both upon the recognition of the type and the fact that they are anachronistic.

⁴⁵ Mark Girouard, The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

Such anachronism has another purpose beyond the comic effect: White wrote that "it is a serious comment on chivalry to make knights-errant drop their 'g's' like huntin' men."⁴⁶ This specific equation of chivalry with hunting is taken up again in "The Queen of Air and Darkness," and the implication is that knights are the equivalent in terms of social values and responsibilities of the landed gentry of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Once again, White is providing a modern counterpart to a feature of the Middle Ages. It could be argued that his evocation of the English upper middle-class, public school, and hunting fraternity devalues chivalry, particularly as the characterisation is so often humorous. John Crane argues that the encounter between the knights is a satirization of chivalry.⁴⁷ His interpretation, however, fails to recognize the subtlety of White's technique. Crane's interpretation of the Pellinore-Grummore joust as satire stems from a misunderstanding of White's attitude to hunting and hunters. During the early 1930s White was an enthusiastic fox-hunter, but he was always aware of the social implications of the sport. Having enrolled on a course in advanced equitation he wrote: "this is all directed at gentility."⁴⁸ Eventually he satirized English blood sports and sportsmen in Burke's Steerage, but his own attitude was more complex than that book, or the Pellinore-Grummore joust might suggest. Sylvia

⁴⁶ Warner, p. 134.

⁴⁷ Crane, pp. 75-85.

⁴⁸ Warner, p. 50.

Townsend Warner quotes and comments on an analysis of his own motives from his Hunting Journal:

'Why hunt? A. (originally) desperation. B. (originally) snobbery. C. desire to excel in every possible direction. D. enjoyment.' This order is borne out by the dutiful tone of the Journal. He liked being on a horse, and jumping excited him; but his hunting lacked the savagery that could make it ring true.⁴⁹

White clearly enjoyed hunting and it was important enough to him to form the focus of several of his books; Earth Stopped, Gone to Ground, England Have My Bones, and Burke's Steerage all have bloodsports as a main subject, and in Farewell Victoria Mundy is a groom. He was motivated partly, at least, by a desire to master skills that was evident in other areas of his life.⁵⁰ Possibly White saw such a "desire to excel" as a plausible motivation for the constant efforts of Malory's knights to succeed in jousts. Nevertheless, he also saw the absurdities of etiquette surrounding the sport and drew a parallel with medieval chivalry. In "The Sword in the Stone," however, the characters are presented with a sympathetic humour which is absent from White's more clear-cut satire:

The hounds, huntsman, master and whips are in front of the cavalcade; then follow a score or so of red coats discussing (a) Diana's divorce; (b) the scandals of the Hunt Ball; (c) Who Got Drunk Last.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Warner, p. 53-54.

⁵⁰ Warner, p. 23.

⁵¹ White, Burke's Steerage, p. 53-54

The use of foxhunting characters in Pellinore and Grummore in "The Sword in the Stone" prepares the ground for the parallel between Victorian foxhunting and Norman warfare which White draws in "The Queen of Air and Darkness." The technique is the same as that noted previously. White takes a recent or modern phenomenon and relates it to some aspect of medieval life in order to bring the Middle Ages closer to the reader. Rather than writing a straightforward satire on chivalry White relates it to fox-hunting as a class-based pastime governed by a strict code of etiquette. Both are regarded by the participants as the natural occupations for men of their class, and both are pursued at the appropriate season and in the appropriate dress. The comparison also implies that the attitude of the medieval knight to warfare was similar to that of the hunting squire. In this case the link was probably suggested by R.S. Surtees creation, Mr. Jorrocks, who stated that hunting is "the sport of kings, the image of war without its guilt, and only five-and-twenty per cent. of its danger."⁵² The link is pursued further by Merlyn in "The Queen of Air and Darkness:"

The link between Norman warfare and Victorian foxhunting is perfect. Leave your father and King Lot outside the question for the moment, and look at literature. Look at the Norman myths about legendary figures like the Angevin kings. From William the Conqueror to Henry the Third, they indulged in warfare seasonally. The season came round, and off they went to the meet in splendid armour which reduced the risk of injury to a foxhunter's minimum. Look at the decisive battle of Brenneville in which a field of nine hundred knights

⁵² R.S. Surtees, Handley Cross: Or Mr. Jorrocks's Hunt (London: Bradbury, Agnew & Co., n.d.), p. 64.

took part, and only three were killed. Look at Henry the Second borrowing money from Stephen, to pay his own troops in fighting Stephen. Look at the sporting etiquette, according to which Henry had to withdraw from a siege as soon as his enemy Louis joined the defenders inside the town, because Louis was his feudal overlord. Look at the siege of Mont St. Michel, at which it was considered unsporting to win through the defenders' lack of water. Look at the battle of Malmesbury, which was given up on account of bad weather. (p. 240)

Following Surtees, and building on the idea of sporting knights created in "The Sword in the Stone" Merlyn articulates White's ideas about medieval warfare as a preliminary to Arthur's attempt to prevent war. His use of the fox-hunting metaphor is consistent with the references in "The Sword in the Stone" in which Sir Ector asserts that "we kill all our giants cubbin'" (p. 5) and by the activities of Pellinore and Grummore. The anachronistic reference is incomprehensible to Merlyn's immediate audience, Arthur and Kay, but not to us.

Anachronism in The Once and Future King has a number of functions. White uses accurate historical detail, but does so to prevent the creation of a fully realized historical background. His technique creates comic effect, as in Merlyn's experience with the top hat. It allows explicit and semi-explicit comparisons between aspects of medieval and modern life. It also indicates that The Once and Future King is not a standard historical novel because it implies a rejection of one of the fundamental features of the genre. The narrator, together with Merlyn, is the source of anachronism in the book and uses it to subvert the historical illusion.

White uses historically accurate detail, drawn from a variety of contemporary sources, to create a vivid impression of medieval life. His appreciation of history on the large scale, however, was not always so well grounded. The war between Arthur and Lot in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" is a conflict of the new order against the conservative old order. White, however, expands the background by giving it a racial motivation. Merlyn explains the racial history of Britain to Arthur and Kay:

About three thousand years ago . . . the country you are riding through belonged to a Gaelic race who fought with copper hatchets. Two thousand years ago they were hunted west by another Gaelic race with bronze swords. A thousand years ago there was a Teuton invasion by people who had iron weapons, but it didn't reach the whole of the Pictish Isles because the Romans arrived in the middle and got mixed up with it. The Romans went away about eight hundred years ago, and then another Teuton invasion -- of people mainly called Saxons -- drove the whole rag-bag west as usual. The Saxons were just beginning to settle down when your father the Conqueror arrived with his pack of Normans, and that is where we are today. Robin Wood was a Saxon partizan. (p. 233)

The account of the invasions is broadly accurate, although it would not bear a detailed examination; but there is no evidence that the social mixture of the British Isles was ever a cause of conflict in the long term, as Merlyn goes on to suggest. The origin of White's view of history is likely to have been Ivanhoe; the relationship which White attributes to the various racial groups is similar in motivation and effect to that which Scott portrays between Saxons and Normans:

Four generations had not sufficed to blend the hostile blood of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons, or to unite, by common language and mutual interests, two

hostile races, one of which still felt the elation of triumph, while the other groaned under all the consequences of defeat.⁵³

Robin Hood/Wood even appears in both books. The conflict of interest that Scott presents is, however, a misrepresentation of history:

In reality, the contrast between Saxons and Normans was not so sharp or so keenly felt as would appear from a reading of Scott, particularly if the puny strength of the Saxon forces at the time of the Norman invasion is borne in mind. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that there were many Saxon noblemen that really believed in the restoration of their monarchy at the end of the twelfth century.⁵⁴

White's interpretation of Scott's view of history is coloured by two additional factors. The Sword in the Stone and The Witch in the Wood were both written in the late 1930s and did not contain references to racial history. White made some revisions to both books, especially The Witch in the Wood, during the early years of World War II, and it seems likely that the war against the Nazis had made White particularly aware of the dangers of racial hatred. The relationship between Saxon and Norman is influenced by the events of World War II: Robin Wood and his men are "like the soldiers of the resistance in later occupations" (p. 102). Furthermore, from 1939 until the end of the war White lived in Ireland, and it reasonable to assume that his view of the history of the

⁵³ Scott, Ivanhoe, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Marinella Salari, "Ivanhoe's Middle Ages," in Medieval and Pseudo-Medieval Literature: The J.A.W. Bennett Memorial Lectures, Perugia, 1982-1983, eds. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Tübingen and Cambridge: Gunter Narr Verlag, D.S. Brewer, 1984), p. 150.

British Isles as a series of invasions which "drove the whole rag-bag west as usual" was influenced by his living in the final refuge of the "rag-bag." It is likely that his sense of racial difference was heightened by an awareness that he was not one with the people among whom he lived. He occasionally felt insecure about his position as an Englishman living in Ireland, and went in fear of the I.R.A.⁵⁵ He was, in fact, regarded with suspicion by some people there and the authorities:

White attracted too much notice in Belmullet. A rumour went round that he was spying for the English. His movements were restricted; he was not allowed on Inniskea. If he hawked, throwing the lure was taken to be semaphoring.⁵⁶

The historical novelist must face the problem of the difference in language between the reader and the historical period in which a novel is set. The language of distant periods cannot be accurately presented because it would be unintelligible to the modern reader. Even the speech of a less remote time, such as the early nineteenth century, is difficult to present accurately because the only records which survive are necessarily written rather than spoken. There is always the possibility, therefore, that when characters speak in what we recognize as period language, the source of that language is literary rather than historical. The distinction between language derived from literature and

⁵⁵ Warner, p. 172-3.

⁵⁶ Warner, p. 174.

actual speech is similar to the distinction between the historical reality and background information obtained from written or visual sources. The problem of language in the historical novel is part of the greater problem that the novelist is writing about a period which has been experienced only at second hand.

There are a number of options open to the historical novelist. For example, the narrative and dialogue can be presented in the same kind of language, or the difference between them can show the difference between the fictional world and the world of the reader. In addition the language used can either be a contemporary style or attempt to present the manner of speech and thought of the fictional period. An extreme example of the latter is found in William Golding's The Inheritors,⁵⁷ in which the experiences of prehistoric people are presented using only language appropriate to their degree of development and view of world. The limitations of Lok's people are emphasized in the final chapter of the book in which the language changes to accommodate the more sophisticated new people who take over. Lok's people, for example, are described as having pictures rather than thoughts: "I have a picture. The fire is flying away into the forest and eating up the trees."⁵⁸ The new people, however, have complex thoughts and can express conditional ideas: "He thought bitterly of the great square sail they had left

⁵⁷ William Golding, The Inheritors (1955; rpt, London: Faber and Faber, 1962).

⁵⁸ Golding, The Inheritors, p. 45.

bundled up in that last mad hour among the mountains; for with that and the breeze through the gap he need not have endured these hours of strain."⁵⁹ Golding uses the language of the narrative as well as dialogue to represent the difference between the two groups. There is no narrative contemporary with the reader to mediate the experience of the characters. Few historical novelists adopt such a radical approach, but it is an interesting example of the way in which language can convey an historical condition.

It is possible to present the narrative and the speech of all the characters in a contemporary form. The advantage of this technique is that no artificial barrier of language is created between characters and reader. Mary Stewart adopts this approach in The Last Enchantment. For example, in this conversation between Arthur and Merlin after Arthur has become king:

"Time, there's been no time. One moment to be nobody -- someone's unacknowledged bastard, and glad to be given the chance to get within shouting distance of a battle, with maybe a glimpse of the King himself in passing; the next -- having drawn a couple of breaths as Prince and royal heir -- to be High King myself, and with such a flourish as no king can ever have had before. I still feel as if I'd been kicked up the steps of the throne from a kneeling position right down on the floor."

I smiled. "I know how you feel, more or less. I was never kicked half as high, but then I was a great deal lower down to start with."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Golding, The Inheritors, p. 223.

⁶⁰ Mary Stewart, The Last Enchantment (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), p. 21.

The language is modern and colloquial throughout, and the characters' experiences are accessible to the reader. Stewart's careful exclusion of inappropriate modern idiom makes for a sanitized effect, which it is easy to feel is not truly modern. Such a style emphasizes the commonness and continuity of human experience throughout the ages rather than any essential differences.

The novelist who chooses to write dialogue in modern colloquial language nevertheless needs to use some words and expressions now obsolete but appropriate to the time, such as descriptions of clothing or household objects. For example, in Katherine, Philippa, when trying to dress her sister suitably for court, grumbles: "So much hair to make neat and hold up in the cauls. . . and she hasn't even a proper girdle or surcoat for warmth."⁶¹ The articles of dress are referred to in the language of the time, indicating to the reader one difference between the period of the novel and the present. Even if the words themselves are not obsolete, they may have a special meaning in context of the novel. For example, the Great Hall at Kettlethorpe is described thus:

There was no fire, nor sign of any, on the central hearth. The eating trestles, planks and benches were stacked high on the far wall. Rain splashed through a hole in the thatched roof on to a corner of the lord's dais.⁶²

⁶¹ Seton, p. 34.

⁶² Seton, p. 107.

None of the words in this passage has fallen out of use completely in modern English, but some have a special meaning within the historical context of the book.

It is also possible for the novelist to create an artificial equivalent to historical speech which stresses the difference between characters and reader. Scott adopts this approach in Ivanhoe; in the opening chapter, after introducing Gurth and Wamba, the narrator comments:

The dialogue which they maintained between them was carried on in Anglo-Saxon, which . . . was universally spoken by the inferior classes . . . But to give their conversation in the original would convey but little information to the modern reader, for whose benefit we beg to offer the following translation . . . ⁶³

The translation consists of the use of the second person singular and some obsolete expressions, for example, "A murrain take thee! . . . wilt thou talk of such things."⁶⁴ The creation of an artificial language draws attention to the remoteness of the past, but it can also create a barrier between the reader and those characters whose experiences are presented through unfamiliar language. White was aware that it can also make the characters appear quaint: "they even condescended to their own ancestors, Scott & Co. writing about them in a sort of Olde Tea Shoppe nursery jargon."⁶⁵ White's

⁶³ Scott, Ivanhoe, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Scott, p. 12.

⁶⁵ White in a letter to L.J. Potts dated 8th January 1941 in Letters to a Friend, p. 123.

attitude is clear and he avoided completely the creation of an artificial language.

Dialogue in The Once and Future King falls into two distinct types; the major characters speak in colloquial modern English, and the minor characters have a more stylized, often humorous style of speech. Arthur, Merlyn, Lancelot, and Guenever all speak in a neutral style which does not convey their historical context. They speak like modern people, but without distinctively twentieth-century idiom, for example:

Mordred is an unhappy young man, and I am afraid he might try any means of giving me an upset. If, for instance, he could see a way of getting at me through you, dear, or through Gwen, I am sure he would try it. Do you see what I mean? (p. 581)

Expressions such as "giving me an upset" and "getting at me" are modern in tone, but not strikingly so. The absence of an historical element in the speech of the main characters increases the directness of their appeal to the reader. A rather different style of dialogue is, however, an important tool of characterization for some of the minor characters. King Pellinore, Sir Gawaine, and Sir Meliagrance are characterized to some extent by their language, although none of them uses an archaic style. Their manners of speech influence the reader's response to them, but its difference from modern colloquial English indicates their social status rather than the historical difference between the reader's and the fictional world. Pellinore's style of speech owes more to P.G. Wodehouse than to the Middle Ages; his habitual use of

"What!" at the end of sentences is reminiscent of Bertie Wooster. Gawaine's Scottish accent is an indication of the political significance of language. He retains it deliberately as an outward sign of national identity: "He still kept his outland accent in defiance of the mere English, but he had ceased to think in Gaelic. His English had improved against his will" (p. 554). Sir Meliagrance is presented as a knight who "was not quite out of the top drawer" (p. 525). His social class is indicated by his cockney accent and use of dialect, for example:

That's the old cock sparrer -- ahem! ahem! Beg pardon, I'm sure. Will it please your gracious Majesty to stye the night at Meliagrance Castle, when you 'ave been and calmed Sir Lancelot, for the sike of your wounded knights? (p. 530)

Meliagrance's exaggerated manner of speech would be tedious if used for a major character. As it is, however, it serves as a shorthand indicator of the character's status and other characters' consequent response to him.

In general both in the narrative and dialogue of The Once and Future King White rejects the historical novelist's technique of creating an artificial period language. In certain circumstances, however, White's characters do use archaic speech, the "High Language of Chivalry," which is explained thus: "in those days there were two kinds of speech like High and Low Dutch or Norman French and Saxon English" (p. 356). The examples of the High Language are very closely based on Malory. For example, when Lancelot encounters

Gawaine as a prisoner of Sir Carados, Lancelot asks:

"What cheer, Gawaine. How stands it with you?"
"Never so hard," said Sir Gawaine, "unless that
ye help me, for without ye rescue me, I know nae
knight that may." (p. 356)

The source in Malory reads thus:

Ah, said Sir Launcelot unto Sir Gawaine, how stands
it with you? Never so hard, said Sir Gawaine,
unless that ye help me, for without ye rescue me I
know no knight that may.⁶⁶

Another example occurs when Lancelot arrives at Meliagrance's
Castle to rescue Guenever:

"Madam," he said, "so ye be pleased, I care not.
As for my part, ye shall soon please."
He always fell into the grandeur of the High
Language, when he was moved. (p. 532)

Malory reads:

Madam, said Sir Lancelot, so ye be pleased I care
not, as for my part ye shall soon please.⁶⁷

White's use of paraphrases from Malory as dialogue has
interesting implications for the book's status as an
historical novel. White does not, like Scott, create an
artificial language, which is neither the language of his
fictional time nor the language of his readers. For most of
the time the major characters speak in modern colloquial
English, in the manner exemplified above by Mary Stewart.

⁶⁶ Malory, Book VIII, 28 (Strachey p. 184). Sprague
has shown that Strachey was the principal text that White
used.

⁶⁷ Malory, Book XIX, 5, (Strachey p. 442).

There is, therefore, no barrier of unfamiliar language to hinder the reader's understanding, nor is there the patronizing tone that White was so anxious to avoid. Occasionally, however, we find modern dialogue interspersed with passages of genuine archaic language. The mixture of the two styles creates a contrast which draws attention to the problem of language for the historical novelist, and consequently to White's method of solving it. The High Language is used when knights are involved in episodes drawn from Malory and is a means of linking the two texts explicitly. The style which White uses encourages the reader to respond to Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenever as characters rather than abstract or symbolic figures. The High Language is a means of elevating the tone of the action and investing chivalry with some of the dignity which it has in Le Morte D'Arthur. A character's use of the High Language suggests that he is a part of a tradition in which knighthood and the pursuit of chivalry express themselves through nobility of speech as well as action. Lancelot and Gawaine are far apart in knightly achievement, but when they communicate through the High Language their common experience and shared ideals as knights are emphasized. The use of Malory's wording also indicates the distance of the fictional period from the reader. White has no need to create an artificial archaic language because he uses a genuine one. The combination of modern colloquial language and the High Language of chivalry enables White to create sympathetic characters and achieve a limited measure of historical authenticity. White's restraint

in using quotations from Malory enables them to have a greater effect than if they were scattered liberally throughout the book. Their scarcity enhances their dignity and suggests the historical period without stressing it unduly. His restraint breaks down only once: at the end of The Book of Merlyn he quotes the whole of Sir Ector's eulogy for Lancelot, which he calls "one of the most touching pieces of prose in the language" (The Book of Merlyn p. 133).

White's attitude to Malory is particularly interesting in the context of the historical novel. He uses Malory as a source in the same way that other novelists use historical sources. It is a convention for the historical novelist to identify the sources used. These are normally either books written by historians, or the historical documents that are the historians' raw material. For example, John Fowles acknowledges E. Royston Pike's Human Documents of the Victorian Golden Age as a valuable work, and Anya Seton lists a variety of historical works. Mary Stewart is something of an exception. Like White, she uses a literary rather than an historical work as a principal source: Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain. The difference is that Stewart does not acknowledge her use of Geoffrey's book within her fiction in any way, let alone as conspicuously as White does his use of Malory.

The narrator of The Once and Future King refers to Le Morte Darthur as though it were an account of historical

events. The narrator sifts Malory's description of Bedegraine for evidence about the conduct of the battle: "As a general, Lot seems to have been a martinet and something of a coward. But he was a tactician in spite of his formality" (p. 311). White frequently refers the reader to his source for further details, particularly when giving accounts of tournaments. For example: "There is no need to give a long description of the tourney. Malory gives it." (p. 364); and:

If people want to read about the Corbin tournament, Malory has it. He was a passionate follower of tournaments -- like one of those old gentlemen who nowadays frequent the cricket pavilion at Lord's -- and he may even have had access to some ancient Wisden, or even to the score books themselves.

(p. 517)

The narrator views Malory as an historian who composed his book from factual sources such as an "ancient Wisden" or tournament score books, rather than the creator of a work of imagination. A similar attitude is revealed in the account of the Grail Quest:

If you want to read about the beginning of the Quest for the Grail, about the wonders of Galahad's arrival . . . and of the last supper at court, when the thunder came and the sunbeam and the covered vessel and the sweet smell through the Great Hall -- if you want to read about these, you must seek them in Malory. That way of telling the story can only be done once. The material facts were that the knights of the Round Table set out in a body, soon after Pentecost, with the immediate object of finding the Holy Grail.

(p. 459)

The narrator establishes a relationship with Le Morte Darthur as both source and supplement. It is a book from which the "material facts" of the story can be gleaned and to which the

reader can refer for more detail. Malory is thus presented as a source of fact, not simply an earlier version of a fictional or legendary story. The reader is given the impression that an objective source exists in Le Morte Darthur of which White uses only the parts relating to the tragedy of the three central characters. Tournaments, the Roman War, and the Quest for the Holy Grail are all treated more fully by Malory; White's narrator acknowledges their existence but explicitly chooses not to use them. In this way the impression is created that White has selected his detail from a much greater store, in the manner of an historical novel. The use of Malory has elements of both historical biography and the historical novel.

The Once and Future King is not an historical novel; no book which so overtly rejects the facts of medieval history as we know them could possibly be considered such. It uses some features of the genre: mentioning historical persons, if only to deny their existence, and citing a chronicle, Le Morte Darthur, as a source for its own story, although that chronicle is itself a work of fiction. The Once and Future King also exhibits another feature of the historical novel identified by Shaw and Fleishman: it reveals the historical process at work. In The Book of Merlyn Merlyn says of White's work: "Fancy starting after William the Conqueror, and ending in the Wars of the Roses" (The Book of Merlyn p. 4); but only by doing so could White encompass the development of medieval civilization and its collapse. Arthur is the architect of the

peace needed to create the great achievements of medieval Europe, and his work was constantly threatened and ultimately destroyed by war-mongering men. It is irrelevant that Arthur does not correspond to a single English king, or even that the historical kings, "legendary figures like the Angevin kings" (p. 240), did not pursue peace as Arthur does. He represents the peaceful impulse which White believes exists in people: "he had been forged as a weapon for the aid of man, on the assumption that men were good" (p. 666). White presents the three main characters as admirable people, but as products of their time, for example, Lancelot's religious belief and Guenever's wasted potential; he presents Chivalry as an admirable idea which fails only because most men are not capable of living up to its ideals; and he presents the age of Arthur as a glorious and vivid time in which people could fulfil their potential. For White these are the admirable qualities of the Middle Ages which are symbolized by Arthur's kingship. Historically there was no king who lived up to Arthur's standards, but the existence of stories about Arthur suggests that he represented the unfulfilled ideals of the age.

The Once and Future King does not present the true history of the Middle Ages. It employs some of the techniques of the historical novel as a basis for the presentation of the ideals of the age, and the undermining of those ideals by war. The book dramatizes the historical flux, a movement from war to peace and back again to war. White

represents the process as chronological; the anarchy of Uther, followed by Arthur's peace, destroyed in turn by Mordred's war. The mixture of war and peace, achievement and destruction, was more complex in the historical Middle Ages, but White's presentation of Arthur's story reveals more sharply than history the conflicting impulses of humanity.

Chapter Seven

Elements of the Romance in White's Arthurian Books

Romance has a much longer tradition than the mainstream novel, but it is not an entirely honourable one. Medieval romances, eighteenth-century romances, and the Romantic Movement are recognized as part of a continuous tradition, but twentieth-century romance is much more difficult to identify. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries prose fiction has been dominated by the novel to such an extent that the term "novel" has lost its particular meaning, and consequently the popular meaning of romance has become confined to obsolete or sub-literary genres. Following the work of Northrop Frye,¹ however, critics have acknowledged the romance as a surviving literary form, part of a continuous tradition that predates the mainstream novel and exists alongside it. It has been argued that romance survives as a permanent form because it is concerned with special experiences, such as "love, honour, terror, adoration," and

¹ Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism; and The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1976).

can "express the experiences in their essential nature."² Romance transcends the social realism of the mainstream novel to address fundamental questions. It is the purpose of this chapter to examine the history and generic status of the romance, and to consider whether The Once and Future King exhibits features of that genre.

The main romance tradition can be identified, although its origins are obscure. Vinaver dates the beginning of western romance to the third quarter of the twelfth century and argues that the development of silent reading rather than the public performance of literature was the catalyst for a new way of presenting narrative:

We take it for granted that a reader should use his reasoning faculty, meditate in silence upon the meaning of the facts presented to him, and cultivate the 'thematic' mode as opposed to the purely 'fictional:' a mode which is above all a questioning one. What we fail to realize is that in terms of Western literary history these things are of comparatively recent date. They have been known in more remote areas, as they were known in the Greek and Roman world; but medieval Europe had to discover them afresh.³

Vinaver's argument suggests that it was almost inevitable that Western literature would develop the romance, even before it had access to Greek models, such as Heliodorus' Aethiopica.⁴ This view is consistent with Stevens's idea that only romance

² John Stevens, Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches (London: Hutchinson, 1973), p. 16.

³ Eugène Vinaver, The Rise of Romance (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 2-4, & 15.

⁴ Heliodorus, Aethiopica, trans. Thomas Underdowne, 1587 (London: David Nutt, 1895).

can express certain truths about human experience. The persistence of the genre should, therefore, come as no surprise, but attitudes to romance have varied and it has not always been regarded as a form on which the reader can "use his reasoning faculty."

Arthurian romance was a major strand in European literature in the Middle Ages. Traditional stories about King Arthur were embellished until they became the literary expression of the ideals of the period. Arthur's knights were examples of courtesy, prowess, loyalty and, with the inclusion of the Grail, Christian virtue.⁵ The romances created an idealized image, whose contradictions are apparent in Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight when the hero is faced with the extreme difficulty of living up to his own reputation as a courteous knight and fulfilling his obligations both to the lady and his host. The poem does not imply that the ideals are worthless, but shows how difficult they are to achieve. The wider scope of Malory's work illustrates the continuity and international quality of the romance tradition in the Middle Ages. Writers, many of them anonymous, inspired and were inspired by others all over Europe in a pattern of influence almost as complex as the best romances themselves.

Romance continued to be a popular and developing form in the Elizabethan period; for example, The Arcadia and The

⁵ Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature trans., Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 123-42.

Faerie Queene were original products of the time, and Aethiopica was translated in 1587. Early in the seventeenth century, however, the influence of Don Quixote changed the romance radically. Its effect was "to mark out the province of the romance as the remote and the impossible and to introduce an inhibiting consciousness."⁶ In the eighteenth century, although the romance remained popular with readers, its fantastic nature contrasted with the growing realism in the novel, and it did not always find critical approval. Johnson, for example, wrote:

Why this wild strain of imagination found reception so long, in polite and learned ages, it is not easy to conceive; but we cannot wonder that, while readers could be procured, the authors were willing to continue it: for when a man had by practice gained some fluency of language, he had no further care than to retire to his closet, let loose his invention, and heat his mind with incredibilities; a book was thus produced without fear of criticism, without the toil of study, without knowledge of nature, or acquaintance with life.⁷

Clara Reeve defended the genre against such criticism, claiming that romances:

have always kept their ground amongst the multiplied amusements of more refined and cultivated periods, containing like every other branch of human literature, both good and evil things. They are not to be put into the hands of young persons without distinction and reserve, but under proper

⁶ Gillian Beer, Romance, The Critical Idiom, 10 (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 7.

⁷ Samuel Johnson, The Rambler Vol. I eds. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, Vol. III of Works (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 20.

restriction and regulation they will afford much useful instruction.⁸

Since the eighteenth century the positions held by Johnson and Reeve have continued in opposition. The current use of the term in some quarters to refer only to subliterary forms is a legacy of Johnson's opinion.

The romantic movement emphasized the meditative element of romance noted by Vinaver, turning the focus of literature inward to the poet's own experience. However, the novel consolidated its position as the dominant prose genre and romance ideas were reserved for poetry rather than prose. By 1851 Hawthorne, in the preface to The House of the Seven Gables, felt the need to tell to his readers that the book was a romance and not a novel, and to explain the difference between the two:

The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former -- while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart -- has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.⁹

Hawthorne, in the mid-nineteenth century, recognized that the novel was the dominant form of prose fiction and therefore

⁸ Clara Reeve, The Progress of Romance and the History of Charoba, Queen of Egypt (1785; rpt. New York: Facsimile Text Society, 1930), p. xvi.

⁹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables (n.p.: Ohio State University Press, 1965), p. 1.

described the romance in relation to it. In The Secular Scripture, however, Frye argues that a prose romance tradition did exist:

All through the nineteenth century and our own there had been a flourishing development of romance and fantasy, in Wilkie Collins, Bulwer-Lytton, Lewis Carroll, William Morris and others. Some of these writers were immensely popular in their day, and a few, like Lewis Carroll, have never lost their popularity. But they do not seem to fit the history of fiction as defined by the great realists: they are simply other writers.¹⁰

Twentieth-century romance has developed in diverse ways and there has been a tendency to equate it with subliterate, for example, that published by Mills and Boon, or with marginal genres such as science fiction and fantasy. The term romance was revived 1933 when Gollancz published eight novels of H.G. Wells under the title The Scientific Romances of H.G. Wells.¹¹ Brian Stableford has shown that the scientific romance was a characteristically British genre that enjoyed considerable popularity in the first half of this century, and that it was heir to a strong tradition.¹² Frye has identified the watershed in the general interest in romance as:

the appearance of Tolkein's Lord of the Rings in the mid-fifties. On the T.S. Eliot principle that every writer creates his own tradition, the success of Tolkien's book helped to show that the tradition behind it, of George Macdonald and Lewis Carroll and

¹⁰ Frye, The Secular Scripture, p. 42.

¹¹ Brian Stableford, Scientific Romance in Britain 1890-1950 (London: Fourth Estate, 1985), p. 7.

¹² Stableford, pp. 3-43.

William Morris, was, if not "the great" tradition, a tradition nonetheless.¹³

Tolkien's book appeared only four years before The Once and Future King and the success of both books must be attributed, in part, to the revival of interest in romance. Arthurian stories have formed a large part of the romance and fantasy revival: more than a hundred novels on Arthurian themes have been published in the last thirty years.¹⁴ Its failure "to fit into the history of fiction," together with some other features that Frye identifies as typical of romance, for example, a "perennially childlike quality" and an "extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space"¹⁵ suggest that The Once and Future King is part of the romance tradition.

The most obvious evidence of the continuing popularity of romance is the development of science fiction and fantasy. They derive from romance but are now quite distinct from it. Fantasy, and its relevance to The Once and Future King will be discussed in Chapter Eight. The present discussion is concerned with those features of White's books which stem directly from the romance tradition, rather than from its subsequent development as fantasy. The main distinction between fantasy and twentieth-century romance is that the non-

¹³ Frye, The Secular Scripture, p. 43.

¹⁴ Thompson, p. 3.

¹⁵ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 186.

realistic elements of the former are likely to be the original creations of the author, while in the latter the author depends much more on tradition. There is, however, no clear boundary between the two, and both are relevant to The Once and Future King. The connections between the two subgenres are so close that it will sometimes be necessary to use the same work as an example both of romance and fantasy.

There is a view that romance is best understood as mode rather than genre because the former indicates "the predominance of certain elements rather than the presence of a fixed canon of characteristics identified with a specific genre."¹⁶ This is an attractive proposition because it solves the difficulty that so many modern romances have apparently little in common with their antecedents. However, in Fowler's terminology, romance does have the characteristics of external structure and subject necessary to form a subgenre.

Fowler argues that subject is an important determinant of subgenre,¹⁷ and White's choice of subject clearly places him in the tradition of romance. The Arthurian matter is part of the romance tradition in two ways: it is composed of material that was originally legendary; and it was then developed to present a social ideal. Its mythical origins show in the persistence of the magical elements in the stories, such as

¹⁶ W.J.R. Barron, English Medieval Romance (London: Longman, 1987), p. 2.

¹⁷ Fowler, Kinds of Literature, p. 112.

the powers of Merlin and Morgan le Fay, and later the stories also absorbed Christian mythology. The social idealism of the Arthurian stories and the conflicts which face even the greatest heroes are typical of romance. There has been a trend in recent years to shake off this tradition and set Arthurian novels in an archaeologically accurate sixth century.¹⁸ However, this deliberate rejection of the romance resonance of the stories is a recognition of its power. In choosing to write about Arthur, White placed himself in the medieval romance tradition. The story is so well known that readers necessarily begin with preconceptions that certain characters will appear and certain incidents will occur. In addition to its specific relation to Le Morte Darthur, The Once and Future King has a wider relation to Arthurian literature as a whole.

Structure is an important indicator of genre rather than mode, and the structure of romance is distinctive. Frye noted that romance tended to be episodic and that "at its most naive it is an endless form in which a central character who never develops or ages goes through one adventure after another until the author himself collapses."¹⁹ Vinaver describes the interweaving of episodes in medieval romance as creating "the feeling that there is no single beginning and no single end, that each initial adventure can be extended into the past and each final adventure into the future by a further

¹⁸ Taylor and Brewer, p. 290.

¹⁹ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 186.

lengthening of the narrative threads."²⁰ The characteristic plot of romance is the quest, and Frye sees the hero's rôle as achiever of the quest as "analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer."²¹ The rôle of the Red Cross Knight in Faerie Queene, Book I, is a particularly clear example of this pattern. Perhaps the structure of romance has undergone most change in the history of the form. Under the influence of the novel and the constraints of publishing, romances have become more limited in scope. Some vestiges of it remain, particularly in science fiction and fantasy where popular works often run to several volumes.²²

Frye describes romance characterization in relation to the mainstream novel:

The romancer does not attempt to create "real people" so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes. . . . That is why the romance so often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks, and why a suggestion of allegory is constantly creeping in around its fringes.²³

Romance characters often represent good or evil unambiguously: good characters assist the hero and evil ones hinder him. The motives of characters are not mixed, although evil characters have the ability to appear good, Duessa and

²⁰ Vinaver, The Rise of Romance, p. 76.

²¹ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 187.

²² For example, Julian May's "The Saga of the Exiles" consists of The Many-Colored Land (London: Pan, 1982), The Golden Torc (London: Pan, 1982), The Nonborn King (London: Pan, 1983) and The Adversary (London: Pan, 1984).

²³ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 304.

Archimago, for example, in Faerie Queene, Book I. It is part of the hero's task to identify the true nature of such characters. It does not follow, however, that romance characters are necessarily one-dimensional. Vinaver shows that Chrétien de Troyes creates fully-realized characters, but stresses that they are not "examples of psychological realism in the modern sense of the term."²⁴ Once again the fine distinction between the conventions of the romance and the novel must be stressed. In Chapter Five I, showed that characterization in The Once and Future King is typical of the mainstream novel; and it is not necessary, therefore, to consider it further in the present context.

Frye's account of fictional modes depends on the relative status of the hero, other men, and his environment; in romance the hero is "superior in degree to other men and his environment," he

moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established.²⁵

The status of the hero, particularly in medieval romance, may be indicated by human rank; he is likely to be nobly born but this may not always be apparent at the beginning of the story. In Malory's "Tale of Gareth," for example, the hero's

²⁴ Vinaver, The Rise of Romance, p. 30.

²⁵ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 33.

rank is not recognized by the other characters, and Gareth must prove himself worthy of his birth. Most of White's main characters are both nobly born and prove themselves noble.

In Chapter Four I discussed the social context of The Once and Future King with reference to Frye's comment that the novelist "needs the framework of a stable society" whereas "the romancer deals with individuality, with characters in vacuo."²⁶ The romance is not concerned with ordinary social relations, but its physical world is sometimes vividly presented. In his study of Chrétien's Yvain, Auerbach comments: "Courtly realism offers a very rich and pungent picture of the life of a single class, a social stratum which remains aloof from the other strata of contemporary society," and Beer also notes that "profuse sensuous detail" characterizes the form.²⁷ It is not, therefore, inconsistent with the generic conventions of the romance to find a wealth of physical detail; for example, in the description of feasts and clothing provided whilst Gawain is a guest at Bertilak's castle.

Throughout The Once and Future King White draws attention to his dependence on Malory's book, and, as I argued in Chapter Six, he treats it as an historical source. The

²⁶ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 305.

²⁷ Auerbach, p. 132; Beer, p. 2.

relationship between the two books is, however, more complex than that, and has implications for The Once and Future King as a romance. Malory's sources were the French cyclic prose romances, and his treatment of the material indicates how the romance genre itself had changed between thirteenth-century France and fifteenth-century England. Malory used the stories of the French romances but modified the characteristic interwoven structure. Vinaver, in arguing that Malory made "each knight complete any adventure he undertakes before embarking on the next,"²⁸ overstates the case. Benson notes that Malory did not abandon entrelacement altogether but used simple forms of the technique "such as prophecies and linking episodes."²⁹

There are a number of important differences between the form of Malory's work and that of his sources. His book is much shorter than the prose cycle romances, which although they:

all claimed to be parts of cycles, most of them circulated in manuscripts containing only one or two of the parts, and it must have been a rare reader indeed who was able to know the whole of any one of these cycles.³⁰

In contrast, Le Morte Darthur tells the whole story of Arthur's reign and therefore demands to be read as a whole.

²⁸ Vinaver, The Rise of Romance, p. 127, and cf. Benson, pp. 60-63.

²⁹ Larry D. Benson, Malory's Morte Darthur (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 64.

³⁰ Benson, p. 8.

The reduction in length and interweaving also brought a greater concentration to Le Morte Darthur, and its narrative limitation is in contrast to the romances which could be continued almost indefinitely. Vinaver argues that this had a significant effect on the meaning of Le Morte Darthur:

The change from cyclic romance to a narrative intelligible without reference to anything that lies beyond it and unrelated to any wider scheme of things brings with it a new sense of the tragic; the very restriction of the field of vision heralds the advent of tragedy as an essentially modern form.³¹

Vinaver sees Malory's interpretation of the story as the source of the tragic vision that was so important to White's interpretation. White inherited from Malory a work that derived its subject from the romances, but whose form was in some ways innovative. In taking his story from Malory White took a part of the romance tradition. Subject is a major indicator of subgenre, and it is possible to trace a direct line of descent from the medieval romances to The Once and Future King.

The ordinary limits of human experience do not operate in romance; it "peoples the world with fantastic, normally invisible personalities or powers: angels, demons, fairies, ghosts, enchanted animals, elemental spirits."³² The reader accepts these elements and does not regard them as violations

³¹ Vinaver, The Rise of Romance, p. 136.

³² Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 64.

of probability. The appearance of the supernatural or preternatural is consistent with romance's role in presenting experience beyond that of the everyday world. Supernatural events can be presented with a variety of emphases. Malory does not labour Merlin's powers, nor does he explain them, and the attitude of other characters indicates that such events are consistent within the fictional world. When Ulfius, for example, finds Merlin in order to ask him to help Uther be cured of his love for Igraine, he shows no surprise that Merlin should know the nature of his request before he asks it (I 1: Spisak p. 2). Lewis Carroll's Alice, on the other hand, maintains her grip on what she assumes to be reality and registers surprise at the world around her: "it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it."³³ Even novels that appear to be realistic can undermine that realism by the introduction of supernatural elements in the guise of coincidence. For instance, in The Heart of the Country Pauline and Gerard are rewarded for their act of kindness in taking Natalie's dog, which she could no longer afford to feed, by an immediate improvement in business:

The Tessen filled up with customers as soon as Natalie had gone: the till pinged merrily. Even the 6 oz packets of Brie with capers sold, and Gerard got rid of three whole rounds for someone's impromptu office party. Pauline patted Jax and Gerard said: 'Do remember hygiene! Always wash your hands after handling an animal.' But he said it amiably

³³ Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass and The Hunting of the Snark (1865, 1872 and 1876; rpt. London: The Bodley Head, 1974), p. 2.

and even smiled at a customer and Pauline had the feeling that the shop would do better henceforth.³⁴

The immediacy and extent of the reward carries with it a suggestion that such an event is indeed unlikely, but the humour and optimistic tone of the passage outweigh the improbability.

In The Once and Future King the dominant tone of the supernatural events is also humorous, but as in Malory there is little suggestion that the events are improbable. Merlyn's demonstration of his power on his arrival at the Castle Sauvage is treated with some initial scepticism by Sir Ector:

"Ought to have some testimonials," said Sir Ector doubtfully. "It's usual."

"Testimonials," said Merlyn, holding out his hand.

Instantly there were some heavy tablets in it, signed by Aristotle, a parchment signed by Hecate, and some typewritten duplicates signed by the Master of Trinity, who could not remember having met him. All these gave Merlyn an excellent character.

"He had 'em up his sleeve," said Sir Ector wisely. "Can you do anything else?" (p. 33-34)

Sir Ector has a contradictory but practical attitude to magic; he thinks it is probably a trick, but as Merlyn appears competent and has suitable references he is willing to make use of magic in his household. The tone established by Sir Ector is maintained throughout "The Sword in the Stone;" magic is a useful tool in the Wart's education, but it is presented in a practical rather than a mysterious way.

³⁴ Fay Weldon, The Heart of the Country (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 83.

Merlyn uses his powers in "The Sword in the Stone" mainly to turn the Wart into animals for the sake of his education. Frye regarded talking animals as a feature of romance, but they are now more characteristic of fantasy. It therefore seems more appropriate to discuss this aspect of The Once and Future King in Chapter Eight. The distinction between White's use of talking animals, and his other uses of magic is not arbitrary. The transformation of the young Arthur into various animals was White's own invention, but other supernatural elements in the books are derived from Malory, and indirectly from the supernatural element in the tradition of Arthurian romance. It is therefore appropriate to consider those other elements, including Merlyn's foresight and the power of Morgan and Morgause, in the context of romance, and the animals in the context of fantasy.

In Le Morte Darthur Merlin has the ability to foresee the future. For example: "Merlyn warned the kynge couertly that Gweneuer was not holsome for hym to take to wyf, for he warned hym that Launcelot shold loue her, and she hym agayne" (III 1: Spisak, p. 80). White retains Merlyn's foresight, but in "The Sword in the Stone" the magician's ability to see into the future has an explanation. The explanation is perhaps more conspicuously unnatural than a character having second sight:

Now ordinary people are born forwards in Time, if you understand what I mean, and nearly everything in the world goes forward too. This makes it quite easy for the ordinary people to live, just as it would be easy to join those five dots into a W if you were allowed to look at them forwards, instead of backwards and inside out. But I unfortunately was born at the wrong end of time, and I have to

live backwards from in front, while surrounded by a lot of people living forwards from behind. Some people call it having second sight. (p. 29)

White takes a feature of character directly from Malory, but he embroiders it and overlays it with additional meanings. The idea of second sight is a familiar one, but Merlyn's explanation of it renders it strange under the guise of simplifying it. In explaining the phenomenon to the Wart, Merlyn both emphasizes his power and questions the nature of time. Merlyn's speech implies that the supernatural can be explained, but the explanation is difficult to follow and raises many more questions than it answers. Furthermore the ground is prepared for Merlyn's knowledge of the future, not just Arthur's future, but the future history of Britain between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century. Merlyn's thorough and detailed knowledge of future centuries telescopes the gap between the pseudo-historical time of Uther's and Arthur's reign and White's own present, and highlights the similarities between them.

A number of other characters in White's book retain the supernatural powers that they possess in Le Morte Darthur. Their magical powers are, however, presented in concrete terms which undermine any mystery or romance commonly associated with the character. For example, Robin Wood and Marian correct the boys' misconceptions about fairies in general and about Morgan le Fay in particular:

Kay asked: "Do you mean she is one of those people with bluebells for hats, who spend the time sitting on toadstools?"

There was a shout of laughter.

"Certainly not. There are no such creatures. The Queen is a real one, and one of the worst of them. (p. 98)

The rejection of the conventional image of the fairy prepares the ground for the substitution of an alternative. This is similar to Merlyn's explanation of second sight, in that White clears away common perceptions before substituting a different idea. Morgan, Robin Wood explains, is the Queen of the "Oldest Ones of All," the people who lived in Britain before the Celts, Saxons, or Normans, and who possess forgotten knowledge.³⁵ The supernatural aspect is reduced by this explanation, but not the sense of danger. Robin Wood and his men are strong and live in harmony with their environment, but they speak about Morgan in hushed tones:

"The thing about these creatures that I am speaking of, and if you will excuse me I won't name them again, is that they have no hearts. It is not so much that they wish to do evil, but that if you were to catch one and cut it open, you would find no heart inside. They are cold-blooded like fishes."

"They are everywhere, even while people are talking."

The boys looked about them. (p. 98-99)

³⁵ The origin of the theory that belief in fairies is based on a folklore memory of the original inhabitants of the British Isles who were driven underground by invaders has been traced to David MacRitchie's Testimony of Tradition (London: 1890) by Stewart Sanderson in his edition of Robert Kirk's The Secret Common-Wealth and A Short Treatise of Charms and Spels (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer and Rowman and Littlefield, 1976), pp. 41-42. Sanderson does not subscribe to MacRitchie's theory and argues that folk memories of primitive religion are a more likely source for belief in fairies, p. 43. See also K.M. Briggs The Fairies in Tradition and Literature (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 149.

White creates an atmosphere of tension and apprehensiveness, but not of mystery. The nature of the threat is known and understood, but it is still a threat. The unknown may be frightening, but to know and understand danger, and still recognize it as danger, is even more so. Morgan is neither a flower fairy, nor a mystical power; she is the most dangerous creature that the boys have ever faced.

The preparatory discussion of the raid on Castle Chariot is practical. Robin's men know their duties and can be trusted to perform them correctly. Great emphasis is placed on the need to obey orders. Marian, for example, thinks it wrong to place the boys in such danger, "but, now that their coming was ordered, she accepted them as companions" (p. 104). The efficient performance of woodcraft and fighting skills is given a high priority in the battle against Morgan, suggesting that the natural world can combat the supernatural on equal terms. When the boys reach the castle made of food they are revolted by it:

It was to tempt them to eat.

The place smelt like a grocer's, a butcher's, a dairy and a fishmonger's, rolled into one. It was horrible beyond belief -- sweet, sickly and pungent -- so that they did not feel the least wish to swallow a particle of it. The real temptation was to run away. (pp. 108-9)

The description, as White says, is taken from The Vision of Mac Conglinne, a medieval Irish tale.³⁶ I have already shown

³⁶ Aislinge Meic Conglinne: The Vision of MacConglinne, a Middle Irish Wonder Tale, ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer (London: David Nutt, 1892). White uses Meyer's translation, pp. 66-68.

that White used accurate historical details in the creation of his version of the Middle Ages, and his use of a medieval Irish source is consistent with that approach. The use of The Vision of Mac Conglinne recalls the story of Hansel and Gretel with its use of food to tempt children into danger. The episode is part of the tradition that to eat in fairyland condemns one to remain there as a prisoner. It is characteristic of White to present the source material with vivid detail: "they plodded over the filthy drawbridge -- a butter one, with cow hairs still in it -- sinking to their ankles" (p. 109). The castle is not an idealized vision of food, symbolizing plenty, but a realistic picture of a castle constructed out of unsuitable and disgusting materials. The climax of the description comes when the boys reach the Queen:

Morgan le Fay herself lay stretched upon her bed of glorious lard.

She was a fat, dowdy, middle aged woman with black hair and a slight moustach, but she was made of human flesh. . . Perhaps, when she was outside this very strange castle, or when she was not doing that kind of magic to tempt the appetite, she was able to assume more beautiful forms. (p. 109)

The cumulative effect of the description of the castle and of Morgan herself is to present a concrete and very unattractive image of the supernatural. The Wart and Kay, however, face danger knowingly and willingly, in order to save innocent victims, and they are revolted rather than tempted by the castle of food. The traditions of romance and realism are combined in the description of Castle Chariot to show that the supernatural is dangerous and powerful but not at all seductive, and that it can be conquered by common

sense and practical planning.

Although the supernatural in "The Sword in the Stone" is explained and its mystery removed, it is not reduced to a series of harmless tricks. Morgan is a dangerous enemy, and one of the Wart's lessons is to learn to respect her and her power. Merlyn's example shows that supernatural power can be used for good rather than evil, but his occasional confusion demonstrates that magic is a difficult force to control. His inefficiency is consistent with the practical presentation of magic throughout "The Sword in the Stone." A fallible old man who is in contact with strange and volatile powers, Merlyn is the link between the side of right and the supernatural. His failures to remember his spells correctly foreshadow his failure to tell Arthur the identity of his mother. White is sufficiently skilful to create in Merlyn a humorous character, who can nevertheless be dignified in appropriate circumstances.

The degree to which the supernatural affects the plot of The Once and Future King decreases throughout the book; it plays a large part in "The Sword in the Stone," but very little in "The Candle in the Wind." In "The Queen of Air and Darkness" it is an important element in establishing the character of Morgause. She is introduced in the context of her relationship to Morgan le Fay:

She was not a serious witch like her sister Morgan le Fay -- for her head was too empty to take any great art seriously, even if it were the Black one.

She was doing it because the little magics ran in her blood -- as they did with all the women of her race. (p. 221)

The introduction of the supernatural at the beginning of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" shows magic to be a fact of adult life in White's Middle Ages. The practice of magic is also shown to have more than one level. There is a natural talent which is widespread among the women of the Gaelic race, but magic is also a "great art," requiring a serious commitment and application of talent.³⁷ This initial introduction of Morgause seems to devalue her; but in underplaying her ability as a witch the extent of her human wickedness is thrown into greater prominence.

The spell with which she amuses herself is particularly cruel, revolting, and pointless. Morgause is playing with magic "to pass the time while the men were away at the war" (p. 221), but she has no serious purpose. The aim of the spell is to find the bone in the cat that gives the power of invisibility, but:

It was not that Morgause courted invisibility -- indeed, she would have detested it, because she was beautiful. But the men were away. It was something to do, an easy and well-known charm. Besides, it was an excuse for lingering with the mirror. (p. 222)

She is thus established as a woman who would boil a cat alive to stave off boredom. It is not even clear from this episode whether Morgause is a successful witch: "finally, but before

³⁷ Cf. Malory's account of Morgan's study of necromancy (I 2: Spisak p. 35)

she had tested all the bones, she lost interest" (p. 223). Her dabbling in magic, cruel as it is, is simply an adjunct to her vanity, which is the real driving force of her character.

The boiling of the cat is balanced structurally by her use of the spancel at the end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness." The status of the spancel is played down, it was "a less cruel piece of magic than the black cat had been, but more gruesome" and it was "a piseog rather than a great magic" (p. 316). It is a kind of magic suited to a dilettante witch like Morgause. Her intention to use the spancel is motivated by the same force that led her to boil the cat. She was bored while the men were away, but Lot's return proves disappointing: "the king was asleep, exhausted by the effort of writing his memoirs about the war" (p. 316). Her vanity now demands that she capture a younger man. The pivotal event of The Once and Future King is precipitated by vanity and very minor magic, but White does not allow the supernatural to be the certain or sole cause of the relationship between Arthur and Morgause:

It is impossible to explain how these things happen. Perhaps the Spancel had a strength in it. Perhaps it was because she was twice his age, so she had twice the power of his weapons. Perhaps it was because Arthur was always a simple fellow, who took people at their own valuation easily. Perhaps it was because he had never known a mother of his own, so that the rôle of mother love, as she stood with her children behind her, took him between wind and water. (p. 322)

The possibility of the supernatural is not dismissed, but the emphasis that White places on character and psychological

motivation, which has been shown in the discussion of the novel, may be as great. The questioning of the power of the spancel and the search for another explanation is a characteristic of the novel, but White does not relinquish the connection with romance. The characters are realistically presented, but the supernatural is a part of their experience.

"The Ill-Made Knight" is the book most closely based on Malory and the one that White himself categorized as "romance,"³⁹ but it contains much less magic than the two preceding books. The development of the relationship between Lancelot and Guenever, its effect on Arthur, and the growth of the ideals of the Round Table are the main themes of "The Ill-Made Knight." The magic of childhood and the Celtic twilight are not consistent with the creation of realistic characters facing moral dilemmas. The romance motif of the quest is an important element in "The Ill-Made Knight" which will be discussed further below, and one of the few magical incidents occurs in connections with a quest.

In the course of Lancelot's first quest he and Lionel go to sleep under an apple tree, and while Lancelot is asleep Lionel is captured by Sir Turquine. Subsequently four queens, including Morgan le Fay, place an enchantment on Lancelot and take him prisoner. He escapes and after various adventures he finds himself back at the apple tree where he meets another damsel who will lead him to his next adventure.

³⁹ White, letter to L.J. Potts dated 28th June 1939 in Letters to a Friend, p. 98.

At this point the narrator comments: "the tree was thought to be a magic one, which was the reason why such a lot of traffic went on round it" (p. 365). The prosaic tone of the comment suggests that magic trees, like queens who can cast enchantments are a common fact of life. The special nature of the apple tree is White's own addition; according to Malory it was an apple tree, but he does not claim any power for it. Malory has Lancelot and Lionel sleep under the tree and the adventures begin from there (VI 1-3: Spisak, p. 137-40), but when Lancelot begins to search for Lionel he returns only to "the same forest there he was take slepyng" (VI 7: Spisak, p. 143) rather than to the specific tree. White introduces a supernatural element that is not explicit in Malory. In emphasizing the apple tree White is refer~~ing~~^{ing} to ^{the} tradition that apple trees do have a particular connection with the Otherworld, and often mark the boundary between ^{the} humanity and the fairies.³⁹ Hanging around near apple trees is asking for trouble.

Lancelot's first quests in The Once and Future King are almost all taken from Malory's Book VI, but with an omission interesting for the present discussion. White does not tell the story of the adventure at the Chapel Perilous (VI 14-15:

³⁹ Cf. A.J. Bliss, ed. Sir Orfeo, (London: Oxford University Press, 1954) "It is clearly implied that the ympe-tre in Orfeo's orchard is in some sense identical, or at least closely linked, with the ympe-tre in the other world; and Heurodis, by sleeping under the one, has run the risk of being transported to the other. Nearly every visitor to the Celtic other world has found an orchard of apple trees; and there is some evidence of the importance of a magic apple as a passport" (p. xxxvi). See also Briggs, pp. 83-84.

Spisak, p. 151-4), although he does refer to it: "there came a knight called Sir Meliot de Logres, who had been rescued under supernatural circumstances" (p. 377). In Malory, Lancelot's adventure at the Chapel Perilous and his encounter with the thirty ghostly knights is the most other-worldly episode in this series of adventures. It seems likely that White omitted it because it was too gothic to harmonise with the tone of The Once and Future King. The chapel with its "dymme lamp brennynge" and the knights "more by a yarde than ony man that euer he had sene," who "greded and gnasted" (VI 15: Spisak, p. 152-3) at Sir Lancelot, would not further the aim of the quest which was to destroy human abuses of power like those committed by Sir Carados and Sir Turquine. The Chapel Perilous is supernatural by nature and the success of the adventure would not have furthered Lancelot's purpose. White mentions Sir Meliot de Logres, however, in order to show that the adventures which have been described are only a part of Lancelot's achievements which are too numerous to present in detail.

Other supernatural episodes in "The Ill-Made Knight" are taken directly from Malory and are fundamental to the plot, for example, Lancelot's rescue of Elaine from the boiling cauldron. Once again, however, White reduces the supernatural element in the story. The cause of Elaine's torture, the jealousy of Morgan le Fay and the Queen of Northgalis, is referred to in The Once and Future King, because it is consistent with the character of Morgan le Fay. The manner

of the rescue is the same in both Malory and White, but White omits Lancelot's slaying of "an horryble and a fyendly dragon spyttynge fyre oute of his mouthe" (XI 1: Spisak, p. 400). A dragon would seriously undermine the realism of the episode, and would detract from the emphasis which White places on the relationship between Lancelot and Elaine and its consequences for Arthur and Guenever. Furthermore, it was stated in "The Sword in the Stone" that there were dragons in the Forest Sauvage, but that they were "small ones, which lived under stones and could hiss like a kettle" (p. 12). If the dragons of Arthur's idealised childhood have been so scaled down, it would be too intrusive and inconsistent for Lancelot to kill a dragon as large and dangerous as that in Malory.

Throughout The Once and Future King the supernatural becomes progressively less significant until in the second half of "The Ill-Made Knight" and in "The Candle in the Wind" there is very little magic. The Christian supernatural does, however, play an important part towards the end of "The Ill-Made Knight," in the quest for the Holy Grail. White's approach to this part of the story illustrates the point that romance can be understood in terms of genre rather than mode. The story of Holy Grail, with its quest motif, its knights wandering through a forest encountering supernatural adventures, is typical of romance. White, however, chooses not to present the story in the manner of a romance:

If you want to read about the beginning of the Quest for the Grail, about the wonders of Galahad's arrival. . . and of the last supper at court, when the thunder came and the sunbeam and the covered

vessel and the sweet smell through the Great Hall --
if you want to read about these, you must seek them
in Malory. That way of telling the story can only
be done once. (p. 459)

This is a bold assertion by White that he does not intend to
to follow Malory's method of presentation.

The originality of White's presentation of the Quest for
the Holy Grail effectively illustrates one of his main
concerns in The Once and Future King. The story is told
piecemeal by the knights who fail the Quest, and their
narratives reveal the experience of people caught up in
exceptional events. The story-telling all takes place at
Camelot, so that the effect of the Quest on the Court is also
revealed. The simplicity of the sentence "it was a lonely
time for those at home" (p. 459) evokes the feelings of
isolation and helplessness of people left behind in a war.
The story of the Holy Grail in The Once and Future King is
concerned less with spiritual struggle than with the
experience of people, both on and off the Quest, who are
witnessing momentous events. White's method contrasts with
Tennyson's use of Percivale, one of the successful Grail
knights, to tell the story of the Quest.

The story of the Grail is told in four stages as the
various knights return to court; Gawaine, Lionel, Aglovale,
and finally Lancelot. Each relates his personal experiences
of the Quest, so that the whole account is fragmented and
subjective. The manner of presentation is untypical of

romance in that each account reflects the character of the knight concerned. The most striking example of this is Gawaine whose tendency to unthinking violence condemns him to failure on the Quest. Gawaine behaves on this Quest exactly as he has done in the past, and his story is one of frustration with occasional outbreaks of violence and murder. He makes no attempt to understand the terms on which the Quest must be conducted and ignores the advice and explanations of the various hermits that he encounters, for example: "he said manslaughter was contrary to the quest. We juist made speech with him, and slipped away while he was talking yet" (p. 464). Gawaine seems unable to learn from his experience, but the questions that Arthur asks him show that the King is aware of the special nature of the Quest; for example: "Did he tell you that the reason why neither of you had had any luck was because you were only looking for slaughter?" (p. 464). Although Gawaine's personal quest seems to have been futile it provides an illustration of the difference between this Quest and the more usual kind.

Lionel's account of the quest concerns his brother, Bors, one of the successful Grail knights. It reveals the difficulty that an ordinary sinful person has in coping with someone who is trying not to sin: "'Morals," said Lionel, "are a form of insanity. Give me a moral man who insists on doing the right thing all the time, and I will show you a tangle which an angel couldn't get out of"' (p. 466). The story of Bors, told from Lionel's point of view, is a realistic account

of the frustration and confusion caused when Bors consistently acts in accordance with religious principles. Lionel is so angry when Bors abandons him in order to rescue a maiden that he later tries to kill him. Unlike Gawaine, Lionel learns from his experience and is, with hindsight, able to understand his brother's difficulty. Nevertheless his account of the deaths of the hermit and Colgrevance, and Bors's refusal to fight his brother highlights the conflict of the normal code of the Round Table and the special conditions of the Grail Quest. Lionel says:

Don't forget that I was in a frightful rage, and the fellow prevented me from getting at Bors, and I am a plain man of my hands. They were baffling me with a sort of moral weapon, and I used my own weapon against it. I felt that Bors was standing up to me in an unfair way, and that this hermit was helping him. I felt that he was setting his will against mine. If he wanted to save the hermit, let him stop being obstinate and get up and fight. If you see what I mean, I felt that the hermit was his business, not mine. (p. 470-1)

The confusion apparent in the repetition of "I felt" reflects Lionel's shame at his murder of the innocent hermit. His reaction to the tests of the Grail Quest is typical of the unsuccessful knights, but is more acute because it was his brother who deserted him in pursuit of the high moral standards of the Quest. His love for Bors involves him more deeply than Gawaine, for example, and as a result the conflict is sharper.

The presentation of the Quest for the Holy Grail through the experiences of the failed knights is consistent with

White's approach to character discussed in Chapter Five. White explores the way in which realistic characters would react to the pressures of being involved in apparently inexplicable events. The impact of the story is changed so that the spiritual experiences of Galahad, Perceval, and Bors are distanced from the reader. The story of the Grail is one from which ordinary human beings are excluded. In The Once and Future King White tells the story of the exclusion from the Quest rather than its achievement.

Lancelot's story is the culmination of the Grail Quest for White, and the impact of the quest on this character is its most significant implication. The spiritual aspect of Lancelot's character has already been discussed, but it is also important in the context of the supernatural. The climax of "The Ill-Made Knight" is not the achievement of the Grail, but the healing of Sir Urry, Lancelot's rather than Galahad's miracle. The healing completes the structure of the book because it is the fulfilment of a desire which is revealed in the second chapter of the book: "He wanted, through his purity and excellence, to be able to perform some ordinary miracle -- to heal a blind man or something like that" (p. 335). Like the Quest for the Holy Grail, the healing of Sir Urry is important for its impact on an individual.

White places a different emphasis on the episode compared to Malory. Like Malory, White says that the wounded knight had travelled far and wide looking for the best knight in the

world to heal his wounds, White also says, however, that "everybody had told him, everywhere, that his only chance was Lancelot, and in the end he had come to seek" (p. 541). Therefore in The Once and Future King Lancelot is under the pressure of an explicit expectation on the part of the wounded man, which Malory's character does not experience. The tension is heightened in White's version by Lancelot's presence in Carlisle throughout the entire operation:

He was hiding in the harness-room of the castle, whence he could spy the field. There were plenty of leather reins in the room, hanging orderly among the saddles and the bright bits. He had noticed that they were strong enough to bear his weight. He was waiting there, hidden, praying that somebody -- Gareth perhaps? -- would be able to do the miracle quickly: or, if not, that they would overlook him, that his absence would not be noticed. (p. 541-2)

The passage reveals the feelings of a great man waiting for his lifetime of secret guilt to be exposed to the world. It is ironic that although the Grail was theologically a much more important event, the isolated and secret nature of his failure prevented the full truth from being revealed. Sir Urry, however, lies in the full gaze of the public waiting to be healed. Malory does not develop the same degree of suspense because Sir Lancelot is not present during the other knights' attempts at healing. He arrives when everyone else has failed. In both versions Lancelot is publicly diffident about the request, and anxious not to appear conceited, but responds with compassion to a plea from the wounded knight. White's presentation focusses attention much more closely on Lancelot and his feelings throughout the episode, until the

moment of success when the perspective changes to Guenever. The healing of Sir Urry, Sir Lancelot's miracle, is an experience which the characters anticipate, live through, and react to, rather than a supernatural event, narrated in a neutral tone. Characteristically, White is more concerned about the responses of his characters to an event than the significance of the event itself. In this respect then, White uses romance material to further one of the features of his book most closely related to the generic repertoire of the novel.

The supernatural is traditionally an important element in Arthurian literature, and even those modern interpreters who seek to present a realistic version of the story do not ignore it. Mary Stewart, for example, has Merlin travel to the far east, there to be trained as a mathematician. This is in order to provide a realistic explanation for the story, told by Geoffrey of Monmouth, that Merlin transported Stonehenge from Ireland and erected it on Salisbury Plain.⁴⁰ The interest that various supernatural characters take in Arthur suggests that he is more than ordinarily important as a king. He and his knights become the vehicles for battle between the positive and negative forces. The supernatural is a strong part of the tradition of Arthurian literature; it plays an important part in Malory. There are fewer supernatural events in White's book, and they decrease in number as the work

⁴⁰ Mary Stewart, The Crystal Cave (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970).

progresses, until there are none at all in "The Candle in the Wind."

The Once and Future King is in the main tradition of Arthurian romance and as such contains elements of the supernatural. The manner of presentation is, however, unique. White stresses continually that Malory is his source, and occasionally directs the reader to Le Morte Darthur for further information on some subjects. The Quest for the Holy Grail is one such subject, White says:

That way of telling the story can only be done once. The material facts were that the knights of the Round Table set out in a body, soon after Pentecost, with the immediate object of finding the Holy Grail. (p. 459)

I showed in Chapter Six that White regards Le Morte Darthur as an "historical" source, and that events narrated by Malory are treated by White as facts to be interpreted. This treatment is extended to the supernatural. White does not rationalize magic as Mary Stewart does, nor does he create the kind of mystical atmosphere found in works such as Marion Bradley's The Mists of Avalon.⁴¹ In White's books the supernatural is a fact whose veracity is not questioned, and it is explained, not with reference to science, but in its own terms. Magical powers are the result of heredity; Morgan, Morgause, and Merlyn, are all descended from the "Old Ones," who occupied Britain before the Celts brought iron, and the power is not, intrinsically, good or evil. In the raid on the Castle

⁴¹ Marion Bradley, The Mists of Avalon (1982; rpt. London: Sphere, 1984).

Chariot Morgan's identity and power are discussed, but there is no suggestion that her power is not genuine. In *Gramarye*, therefore, the presence of the supernatural is a fact of life, and it is neither explained away, nor mystified. Once again, White is working on the border between two subgenres; the matter is unequivocally romance, but the presentation is realistic.

Frye identifies the quest motif as a characteristic feature of romance.⁴² Its importance in medieval romances, such as those of Chrétien de Troyes, is clear but it is equally significant in modern versions of the genre. The best known modern quest romances are probably The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.⁴³ In the former Bilbo goes in search of gold, and also finds the ring; in the latter the quest motif is inverted because Frodo's task is to destroy the ring. Much science fiction also conforms to the pattern of the quest. In Out of the Silent Planet, for example, Weston and Devine undertake the journey to Malacandra in order to further their own wealth and power.⁴⁴ The quest can take various forms, either to find something, or to lose it, and the reader's

⁴² Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 187.

⁴³ J.R.R. Tolkien, The Hobbit: or There and Back Again (1937; rpt. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966); The Fellowship of the Ring 2nd ed. (1954; rpt. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), The Two Towers 2nd ed. (1954; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), and The Return of The King 2nd ed. (1955; rpt. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966).

⁴⁴ C.S. Lewis, Out of the Silent Planet (London: The Bodley Head, 1938).

sympathy can be with the quester or with those trying to obstruct the quest.

Many of the quests in The Once and Future King are derived from Malory and are necessary to further the plot or develop character. Lancelot's quests and the Quest for the Holy Grail certainly fall into this category, and will be discussed further below. The questing in "The Sword in the Stone" lacks the gravity of the later quests, particularly that for the Holy Grail. The first quester to appear in "The Sword in the Stone" is Sir Grummore who "was staying the night because he had been benighted out questin' after a specially long run," (p. 4) and he discusses his day's activity with Sir Ector:

Sir Ector said, "Had a good quest today?"

Sir Grummore said, "Oh, not so bad. Rattlin' good day, in fact. Found a chap called Sir Bruce Saunce Pité choppin' off a maiden's head in Weedon Bushes, ran him to Mixbury Plantation in the Bicester, where he doubled back, and lost him in Wicken Wood. Must have been a good twenty-five miles as he ran." (p. 4)

Sir Grummore's description is based on White's own experience of fox-hunting rather than on the romance tradition of questing; each of the places mentioned in the quotation is within a few miles of Stowe School, where White taught from 1932 to 1936, hunting as often as he could.⁴⁵ Sir Grummore's attitude and White's use of his own hunting experience places questing in the same category of activity as fox-hunting. Knights go questing because it is the usual activity of people

⁴⁵ Warner, p. 60.

of their class and the ostensible purpose of the exercise is to rid the countryside of vermin. Sir Grummore's experience shows that questing is not entirely successful in achieving this purpose. King Pellinore's rôle as a quester is determined by family tradition, but even he recognises the futility of his life's work: "'It is the curse of the Pellinores,' he exclaimed. 'Always mollocking about after that beastly Beast. What on earth use is she, anyway?'" (p. 18). Thus the first two questers to appear in "The Sword in the Stone" are unsuccessfully engaged in a pointless exercise.

The potential value of questing is revealed in an unexpected way. On Sir Grummore's suggestion Sir Ector intends to start a quest for a tutor "as soon as he had time to do so, and, as he was not sure how to set about it, he told the boys what Sir Grummore had suggested" (p. 5). When the Wart finds that Merlyn will be the new tutor he is delighted: "'My!' exclaimed the Wart, while his eyes sparkled with excitement at the discovery. 'I must have been on a Quest!'" (p. 31). That the Wart regards questing as a noble activity is shown by his capitalizing the word. It is something to which he aspires but did not expect to experience because of his doubtful birth. In contrast to Sir Grummore's and King Pellinore's, the Wart's quest was undertaken unconsciously, was successful, and was useful. It is an indication of what questing can be. In "The Sword in the Stone" the idea of the typical knight errant's quest is used entirely for humour, but the seed of its serious use is planted.

Lancelot's quests in "The Ill-Made Knight" have two purposes: one is to allow him to escape from Guenever and the other, more public reason, is to rid Arthur's kingdom of oppressive barons. White uses the quests to further the development of Lancelot's character and the process of pacification. The quest plot is a characteristic of romance, but White's emphasis on the motivation of the quester is in the mainstream novel tradition.

The quests discussed so far have been only episodes, rather than the main plot, unlike the other examples of the quest romance. According to Frye, the characteristic literary form of the romance is "a sequence of minor adventures leading up to a major or climacteric adventure, usually announced from the beginning, the completion of which rounds off the story."⁴⁶ The structure of The Once and Future King is a sophisticated variant on this pattern. The major quest of the book is Arthur's search for "an antidote for War;"⁴⁷ the theme which White saw as central to Le Morte Darthur. The secondary quests are all stages in the main quest, but, unlike most literary quests, it is not ultimately achieved.

Arthur's quest is not announced at the beginning of "The Sword in the Stone" because at that point neither his true identity nor his destiny is known to the reader. The Wart

⁴⁶ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 186-7.

⁴⁷ White, in a letter to L.J. Potts dated 6th December 1940 in Letters to a Friend, p. 117.

is, however, the first character to complete a quest successfully. Both Sir Grummore and King Pellinore are engaged, with no success, in apparently pointless quests, and therefore the Wart's achievement in discovering Merlyn implies his superiority over the two knights. The plot of "The Sword in the Stone" as a whole does not take the form of a quest, except for the general quest for knowledge. However, the Wart's education is episodic and no single goal is apparent. It is, nevertheless, a necessary preparation for the quest that begins in earnest in "The Queen of Air and Darkness."

Arthur's initial response to the first Gaelic war, that it was "a splendid battle" (p. 225), is criticized by Merlyn who argues that the king is thinking like his father. After a little consideration and a long diatribe from his tutor, Arthur asks: "Might isn't Right, is it, Merlyn?" (p. 229). The question is the beginning of Arthur's quest, his search for an "antidote for War." Aside from the content of the question, the fact of Arthur's having asked it is also significant. Arthur's willingness to question the established conventions of power mark him out as different from his father. Uther Pendragon was not the kind of king to question his right to power and his methods of maintaining it. Merlyn describes the racial history of the British Isles in an attempt to explain to Arthur the reasons for the Gaelic Wars, and Arthur responds:

"There seems to have been a good deal of provocation. Perhaps I ought not to fight?"

"And give in?" asked Kay, more in amusement than dismay.

"I could abdicate."

They looked at Merlyn, who refused to meet their eyes. He rode on, staring straight in front of him, munching his beard.

"Ought I to give in?"

"You are the King," said the old man stubbornly.

"Nobody can say anything if you do." (p. 235-6)

In his conversations with Merlyn Arthur questions the whole basis of his power, and by extension, the power of those who oppose him. He is laying the foundations for radical changes to his rule by examining the roots of the condition of his kingdom. The unity of all four books, depending on the consistency of Arthur's character, was discussed in Chapter Three, and in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" Arthur has matured but is still recognizably the Wart. The character is consistent in his desire to question, but has learned to exercise moderation. Arthur, for example, in his discussion with Merlyn about how to spot the aggressor in a war, and his acceptance of Merlyn's dictum that "you can always spot the villain, if you keep a fair mind" (p. 238) contrasts with his persistent questioning, as a boy, of Merlyn's apparent refusal to turn Kay into animals as well (pp. 82-89). The contrast is further marked by Kay's attitude in the discussion on warfare; Kay's persistence in taking the discussion to its logical conclusion provokes a similar response from Merlyn, "Oh, go and put your head in a bucket," (p. 239), to that which he gave to the Wart in the earlier episode, "Oh, flout the boy!" (p. 86). Arthur has gained self-control and an ability to

understand his opponent's argument, qualities particularly valuable to a ruler who is trying to develop a humane philosophy of government.

Arthur makes a statement of his philosophy, and the quest that is a consequence of it in Chapter VI of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" and the scene is vital to Arthur's development as a king:

"You see," he said proudly, "I have summoned a council."

There was a pause, for it was the first time that Arthur had made a speech, and he wanted to collect his wits for it. (p. 252)

The speech is his first original and public act as king and it sets out his aims, and the reasons for them, for the whole of his reign. Arthur explains that battles are, in the abstract, a bad thing, but finds a paradox in Merlyn's behaviour, since the magician helps him to win the battles although he believes them to be wrong. Arthur stumbles towards a resolution of the problem:

"I could only think," said he, beginning to blush, "I could only think that I -- that we -- that he -- -- that he wanted me to win them for a reason."

He paused and looked at Merlyn, who turned his head away.

"The reason was -- was it? --the reason was that if I could be the master of my kingdom by winning these two battles, I could stop them afterwards and them do something about the business of Might. Have I guessed? Was I right?" (p. 253)

Arthur has achieved the first part of his quest in identifying the problem. Unlike other quest heroes, such as Lancelot, he does not go out in to the world looking for adventure, nor

like Bilbo or Frodo, leave home to fulfil the expectations of other people. Arthur finds himself in a situation, that of being warred upon, which he could conceivably accept as normal and simply join in the wars. Instead, he examines the situation and identifies the problem which once recognized is a step nearer solution. "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness," dramatize the process of Arthur's development to a point where he can identify his quest and plan how to achieve it:

My idea is that if we can win this battle in front of us, and get a firm hold of the country, then I will institute a sort of order of chivalry. I will not punish the bad knights, or hang Lot, but I will try to get them into our Order. We shall have to make it a great honour, you see, and make it fashionable and all that. 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. (p. 254)

This passage corresponds to the announcement of the quest described by Frye; it comes at the beginning of the hero's maturity, preceded by his preparation for the task.

"The Ill-Made Knight" concerns Arthur's attempt to put his plan into practice. Lancelot's quests, in addition to serving Lancelot's personal needs, are part of the scheme of using Might for Right. The success of the plan, which is achieved through the work of the Round Table knights, is shown in Chapter XXV (pp. 442-7), which was discussed in Chapter Four. Arthur succeeded in the task he set himself before the Battle of Bedegraine: he persuaded his knights to use their military skills for good and eradicated the abuses of

Uther's reign. He then found that he had not cured the problem, and says: "unfortunately we have tried to establish Right by Might, and you can't do that" (p. 455). The king, having been trained by Merlyn to think, continues to do so, and concludes that:

We have run out of things to fight for, so all the fighters of the Table are going to rot. Look at Gawaine and his brothers. While there were still giants and dragons and wicked knights of the old brigade, we could keep them occupied: we could keep them in order. But now that the ends have been achieved, there is nothing for them to use their might on. So they use it on Pellinore and Lamorak and my sister -- God be good to them. (p. 455)

Arthur's quest is not a simple one in which the quester sets out to achieve a pre-defined goal. It appears that the Round Table has been successful, but the outbreak of violence by the Orkneys forces Arthur to recognize that only part of the problem has been solved; the worst excesses of the old regime have been destroyed, but the principle of Might lives on.

The next stage of Arthur's quest is the Quest for the Holy Grail. In The Once and Future King the Quest is motivated by an impulse fundamentally different from that in Le Morte Darthur. In Malory's version the story of the Grail begins with Lancelot's being summoned to knight Galahad in order that the young knight may fulfil his destiny. Arthur bows to the inevitable but has reservations about it:

And therewyth the teres fyl in his eyen. And thenne he sayd, Gawayne, Gawayne, ye haue sette me in grete sorowe, for I haue grete doubte that my true felaushyp shal neuer mete here more ageyn.

(XIII 8: Spisak, p. 433)

White's version, in contrast to Malory's, has an entirely human motivation. Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenever are discussing the problem of surplus Might, and Arthur has the idea of a religious quest:

We have used up the worldly objects for our Might -- so there is nothing left but the spiritual ones. I was thinking about this all night. If I can't keep my fighters from wickedness by matching them against the world -- because they have used up the world -- then I must match them against the spirit. (p. 456)

In The Once and Future King the idea of a religious quest originates with Arthur as part of his plan for controlling Might. It does not spring solely from the inevitable fulfilment of a prophecy as it does in Malory. The arrival of the messenger requesting Lancelot to knight Galahad, although clearly pre-ordained, is secondary to the decision to search for the Grail that Arthur and Lancelot have already made. The spiritual element is, therefore, reduced in White's version because the original motivation for the Quest is entirely earthly. I have shown that the presentation of the Quest emphasises the realistic experiences of the least spiritual characters, and the earthly motivation of the Quest is consistent with this approach. For White the Quest for the Holy Grail was something experienced by characters whose humanity he is at pains to emphasise throughout The Once and Future King. Their humanity and their falling short of the ideals of the Grail are the dominant features of its presentation. The story continues, as it must, with the surviving knights rather than with the successful ones,

although Sir Bors does eventually return to court. Again the separation between the spiritual life and the life of the court is stressed; the Grail Quest was successful in its own terms, but not in the way that Arthur had hoped. Malory's Arthur recognizes that this will happen, and sees in the Grail Quest both the high point and the beginning of the end of the Round Table. For White's Arthur it is an ultimately unsuccessful stage in his effort to eradicate Might.

The final stage of his fight against violence, the idea of abstract justice, is the subject of "The Candle in the Wind." Arthur tries to use the law in order to control men's behaviour towards each other without resorting to violence, not even the formalized violence of the judicial duels, such as those at the end of "The Ill-Made Knight." The book dramatizes the working of the law, and shows that, like force, it can be used to evil ends as well as good, and that it is ultimately inadequate to deal with mass violence. Arthur conceives of the law in the same terms as the Round Table and the Quest for the Holy Grail:

In Uther Pendragon's time there had been no law to speak of, except a childish and one-sided kind of etiquette which was reserved for the upper classes. Even now, since the King had begun to encourage Justice so as to bind the power of Fort Mayne once for all, there were three kinds of law to be wrestled with. He was trying to boil them down, from Customary, Canon and Roman law, into a single code which he hoped to call the Civil one. (p. 583)

The development of the legal system is Arthur's final step to control the power of Might, but its invention is a stage in

his own tragedy. The threat posed by the law is symbolized by the Justice Room, where Arthur goes to arrange the pleas:

The startling thing about it was that the hangings made it square. It was night, so that the windows were covered, and the doors were never uncovered. The result was that you felt you were in a box: you had the strange feeling of symmetrical enclosure which must be known by butterflies in killing-bottles. (p. 583)

The enclosed nature of the Justice Room anticipates the situation in which Arthur finds himself when Mordred and Agravaine elect to use the new law to convict Lancelot and Guenever of treason. Arthur is trapped by a situation which he created himself; he is the victim of his final effort against Might.

In the final chapter of "The Candle in the Wind" Arthur reviews his life and recognizes the stages that he had been through in his search for the "antidote for War." His search has been an entirely conscious one, and therefore deserves the name of quest. Most quest literature culminates with the success of the quest: Frodo, for example, destroys the ring, although the main interest of the book is in the journey, and the final chapters of The Lord of the Rings have an elegaic quality despite the hero's achievement. Arthur fails in his quest; he does not find an "antidote for War," and The Once and Future King ends as he faces the final brutal battle which will destroy his achievements. Nevertheless, the book does not end with an elegy but with an affirmation of hope for the future, as Arthur passes his story on to the young Thomas

Malory. The failure of the quest is not a final failure, and there is a possibility of future success if the story can be communicated so that its lessons can be learned. Arthur faces the last battle with the vision of a new table:

The hope of making it would lie in culture. If people could be persuaded to read and write, not just to eat and make love, there was still a chance that they might come to reason. (p. 676)

The central quest theme of The Once and Future King affirms the value of the attempt, regardless of success or failure, to find the "antidote for War." Lancelot's quests and the Quest for the Holy Grail for a part of Arthur's great quest. In some respects Arthur's quest is typical of romance, in that the hero faces alone a heavy responsibility, on which the fate of many other people depends. The ultimate failure of the hero's quest is uncharacteristic of romance. In The Once and Future King, however, the failure is balanced by the hope for the future that Arthur still clings to even when facing his final battle. Arthur's attitude is an affirmation of the value of the struggle against evil, even if the struggle is not a success.

In its subject and structure The Once and Future King exhibits some of the generic repertoire of romance. The story of King Arthur is a typical romance subject, and White presents his story within the main tradition by retaining much of the supernatural matter that other modern versions rationalize. The quest is a conventional romance plot that has found new life in works of fantasy and science fiction.

The minor quests in The Once and Future King are traditional parts of Arthur's story that White derived directly from Malory. White's emphasis on Arthur's personal quest for good government and peace is a modification of the traditional plot. Characterization and other features of The Once and Future King are not typical of romance; but the presentation of the quests and the supernatural in conjunction with realistic characterization gives The Once and Future King a vigour that would not have been possible using unmixed the romance or mainstream novel genres.

Chapter Eight

Elements of Fantasy in White's Arthurian Books

Fantasy is a major element in White's post-war work other than The Once and Future King.¹ It has been suggested that that dominance of fantasy in these works is responsible for their relative obscurity: "this is not a century that puts much stock in fantasy and those who do -- as, say, the army of Tolkien followers -- tend often to be cultish."² Although it is true that little attention has been given to White's fantasies, it is misleading to suggest that fantasy is valued only among the cult followers. It is possible to admire Tolkien without naming one's first child Frodo. Furthermore, the critical neglect of White's work extends beyond the fantasies to include The Once and Future King itself. This is not because White wrote fantasies in a world which values only hard realism, but, as I have argued, because he wrote in a mixture of genres which leaves critics confused about the appropriate tools of interpretation.

¹ T.H. White, Mistress Masham's Repose (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947); The Elephant and the Kangaroo (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948); The Master (London: Jonathan Cape, 1957).

² John K. Crane, "T.H. White: The Fantasy of the Here and Now." Mosaic, 10, No. 2 (1977), 33-46.

The present task is to consider what features commonly associated with fantasy literature combine with features of other genres identified in previous chapters in The Once and Future King. I shall examine some definitions of fantasy, and the characteristics of the form on which those definitions are based. It is also useful to consider the relationship between fantasy and romance, and whether fantasy might be better understood as a mode rather than as a subgenre. An examination of The Once and Future King and The Book of Merlyn in the context of fantasy will reveal that the books exhibit the features of fantasy in a limited, but important way.

Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" is perhaps the single most influential work in discussions of fantasy, and a starting point for many later critics. In it Tolkien argues that the distinguishing characteristic of fairy-stories is the "sub-creation" of a "Secondary World:"

Children are capable, of course, of literary belief, when the story-maker's art is good enough to produce it. That state of mind has been called 'willing suspension of disbelief'. But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside.³

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in Essays Presented to Charles Williams, ed. C.S Lewis (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 60.

It is a characteristic of the secondary world that it contains characters and events which are recognized as impossible in the primary world. Tolkien's essay is most useful in its provision of a terminology which does not rely on the distinction between realistic and non-realistic, terms which can easily be used in a perjorative sense, as was shown in Chapter Four. The terms primary world and secondary world are descriptive and do not imply any relative values between the two. Furthermore, Tolkien's terminology recognizes the importance of realism within the secondary world. Realism in fantasy does not consist of an imitation of the primary world, but a consistent presentation of the secondary world so that it appears as real to the reader as any other literary creation. Such realism is necessary to successful fantasy.

The critical imbalance against fantasy has been remedied to some extent in recent years, and several critics have commented on the resistance of fantasy to definition. C.N. Manlove opens his Modern Fantasy with a quotation from E.F. Beiler that "fantasy may be almost all things to all men."⁴ However, Manlove recognizes the need for a limitation of meaning, and provides this definition:

A fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms.⁵

⁴ C.N. Manlove, Modern Fantasy: Five Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 1.

⁵ Manlove, p. 1.

He returns to the problem in his contribution to Roger Schlobin's collection The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art⁶ in which many of the essays are concerned with defining the genre as a whole or with some aspect of detailed definition. Edmund Little in The Fantasts⁷ begins his discussion from the basis established by Manlove, whereas Ann Swinfen's terms of reference liberate the form from such a rigid classification. She uses the term to mean

both the sub-creative art, with its quality of strangeness and wonder, and the kind of novels which such art produces. The essential ingredient of all fantasy is 'the marvellous', which will be regarded as anything outside the normal space-time continuum of the everyday world.⁸

The term 'marvellous,' as defined by Swinfen, is more versatile than 'supernatural' which, even in its loosest sense, connotes magic or the presence of spirits. Unlike Manlove, Swinfen does not quantify the essential element and therefore can regard as fantasy, or at least partial fantasy, works in which the essential element is limited.

⁶ C.N. Manlove, "On the Nature of Fantasy" in Roger C. Schlobin, ed. The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press and Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp.16-35; see also Kenneth J. Zahorski and Robert H. Boyer, "The Secondary Worlds of High Fantasy," pp. 56-81, which distinguishes between high and low fantasy; and Raymond H. Thompson, "Modern Fantasy and Medieval Romance: A Comparative Study," pp. 211-25, in the same collection.

⁷ Edmund Little, The Fantasts (Amersham: Avebury, 1984), pp. 1-2.

⁸ Ann Swinfen, In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature since 1945 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 5.

In Fowler's theory of genres, kinds of literature are distinguished by external structure.⁹ It has been argued that in the twentieth century the term novel has come to indicate all extended prose fictions, rather than just the mainstream novel. Many fantasies are extended prose fiction, although the term can also be applied to other kinds of literature, suggesting that fantasy may be a mode rather than a genre. Poetic fantasy is possible, as is fantasy in the form of short stories.¹⁰ Tolkien argued that dramatic fantasy was not possible, but he began from the assumption that drama is "fundamentally distinct from Literature."¹¹ In the discussion of romance it was noted that forms of literature that have been claimed as the heirs to the tradition of romance include science fiction, westerns, and sub-literary romantic novels. Fantasy is clearly another. Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between romance and fantasy. In Chapter Seven it was argued that despite a tendency among some critics to treat romance as a mode, it can be shown to have sufficient formal characteristics to be understood as a genre. Unlike romance, fantasy does not have distinctive structural characteristics. It does, however, have a unique feature in the creation of a secondary world, and typical subject in the marvellous. These are sufficient to distinguish fantasy as a subgenre of extended prose fiction rather than as a mode.

⁹ Fowler, p. 60-61.

¹⁰ See for example, Sylvia Townsend Warner Kingdoms of Elfin (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977).

¹¹ Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," p. 68.

The creation of a secondary world, as described by Tolkien, is one of the most characteristic features of fantasy, and is exemplified in his Lord of the Rings. Middle-earth is typical of secondary worlds in that it is entirely self-contained and consistent. Writers of fantasy often use extra-literary devices such as maps, and guides to the languages of a secondary world. Such features, although not integral to the fantasy, make it more vivid and consistent. Tolkien, for example, extends the secondary world of his major work in The Silmarillion,¹² which supplies the reader with more information about the history of the peoples of Middle-earth.

The creation of secondary worlds is evident in many works other than Tolkien's own. Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast is a self-contained secondary world sustained in three books.¹³ It is unusual as a secondary world because it is peopled only by human beings. Gormenghast can be distinguished from the primary world although there are no creatures there who are unknown to mankind. The feeling of strangeness about Gormenghast is largely dependent on the mysterious rituals governing life there, but these are not impossible or alien, except in degree. Nevertheless, Gormenghast is a successful and consistent secondary world.

¹² Tolkien, The Silmarillion ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977).

¹³ Mervyn Peake, Titus Groan (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1946); Gormenghast; Titus Alone (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1959).

The creation of a secondary world seems to be a necessary part of the generic repertoire of fantasy. However, as the case of Gormenghast shows, it is not always clear exactly what constitutes a secondary world. Some works of fantasy present secondary worlds created in direct relation to the primary world. The Lion the Witch and The Wardrobe,¹⁴ for example, opens in a primary world, which emphasizes the strangeness of Narnia by comparison. Some secondary worlds, such as Gormenghast, contain few overt links with the primary world, but others, such as Narnia, are approached from the author's present. The Lord of the Rings itself is linked to the remote past "the Third Age of Middle-earth, . . . now long past, and the shape of all lands has been changed."¹⁵ This explicit connection between Middle Earth and the pre-historic primary world has little impact. Separation from or connection to the primary world is less important than internal consistency and vividness.

Secondary worlds do not form part of the generic repertoire of romance, which is usually set in the primary world. It is not the primary world of the mainstream novel, but the ordinary world of the senses heightened. The effect of romance depends upon the implication that the extraordinary events portrayed are happening in the primary world although they are not consistent with everyday experience. White's presentation of the Quest for the Holy

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950).

¹⁵ Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring, p. 11.

Grail, for example, depends upon the knights' response as ordinary men to extraordinary events. The marvellous, here in the form of the supernatural, breaks through into the primary world. Similarly in Alan Garner's The Owl Service¹⁶ part of the power of the narrative derives from some of the characters experiencing the supernatural while others go about mundane business such as shopping or stealing cigarettes. The presentation of the complex emotional lives and relationships of the characters is a feature associated with the mainstream novel. Garner, however, combines these relationships with the supernatural events of the story, and this combination of realism and the supernatural, together with the absence of a secondary world suggests that The Owl Service is a part of the romance tradition rather than fantasy.

As we have seen, Manlove makes fantasy depend on the presence of the supernatural whereas Swinfen prefers the term marvellous, which is more flexible. Many fantasies contain elements of the marvellous which are not supernatural, for example, the rabbits in Watership Down.¹⁷ When the supernatural does appear in fantasy, it is distinct from the supernatural as it is found in romance. The presence of Merlyn, Morgan le Fay, and the Holy Grail in The Once and Future King is evidence of the book's place in the continuous tradition of Arthurian romance. These elements are largely unalterable, and any writer choosing to use them taps into a

¹⁶ Alan Garner, The Owl Service (London: Collins, 1967).

¹⁷ Richard Adams, Watership Down (London: Allen Lane, 1972).

store of traditional images. Merlyn's function as a positive influence in Arthur's life, and Morgan's negative powers are fixed traditionally, and a writer retelling any large part of the Arthurian story generally makes use of the tradition.¹⁰ The supernatural or marvellous elements of The Lord of the Rings, however, do not derive from a single tradition external to the book. There is, therefore, a considerable difference between the effects of the two kinds of supernatural or marvellous event. Those which derive from an identifiable source, as, for example, in a retelling of the Arthurian story or in The Owl Service, carry with them echoes of a whole tradition. They are the heirs to medieval literature, retelling well-known tales, and employing elements from a common stock of stories. Fantasy, in contrast, is likely to create original supernatural or marvellous characters and events rather than use traditional ones. This is consistent with the idea of the subcreation of a secondary world, which contains features original and exclusive to that world.

The two main features of fantasy, then, are the creation of a secondary world and the presence of original marvellous characters or phenomena. Either of these features will mark a work out as a fantasy. However, the possibility of partial fantasies must be considered because, although it is clear that The Once and Future King does not exhibit either of these characteristics consistently, it has been treated as fantasy

¹⁰ See, for example, Mary Stewart's The Crystal Cave, The Hollow Hills (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), and The Last Enchantment.

by a number of critics.¹⁹ There are, features of The Once and Future King which are related to the main features of fantasy as discussed above; the creation of an alternative history and the use of animals in "The Sword in the Stone" and The Book of Merlyn.

Manlove suggests that The Once and Future King is not a fantasy because its subject is not a created world, but an idealized version of medieval England.²⁰ It is true that Gramarye is not a typical secondary world, because it is so closely based on reality and makes a number of references to known history. Nor is it typical of alternative history, which usually takes a pivotal point in history and creates a world based on a different outcome of the crisis, such as what, for example, would have happened if the English had won the Battle of Hastings. For Manlove, The Once and Future King is not a fantasy because it is linked too closely to historical reality, but White's approach in acknowledging the historical kings of the Middle Ages and treating them as the stuff of legend emphasizes the fantastic nature of his creation. The reader is challenged to reject his notion, but at the same time drawn into the fantasy by the vividness of the portrayal.

¹⁹ For example C.N. Manlove The Impulse of Fantasy Literature (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 93-114.

²⁰ Manlove, Modern Fantasy, p. 5.

White's Middle Ages are neither historical setting nor secondary world, but have elements of both. They also subvert both. The descriptions of concrete objects in The Once and Future King all refer to objects that existed at various points in human history between 1066 and 1945. Most objects belong to the Middle Ages, but the great range of them highlights the anachronistic element in the book. Castles, clothes, armour, weapons, food, and a variety of other details combine to create a vivid impression of the Middle Ages. The set-piece descriptions in Chapter XXV of "The Ill-Made Knight" and Chapter III of "The Candle in the Wind" gain much of their force from the volume of information. Their effect, however, is to create an impression of historical England, not of some other world. The creation of the fictional Middle Ages is dependent upon the use of much concrete detail about the customs and technology of the time, particularly concerning warfare and sport. The boar hunt, for example, is explained to the reader in comparison with modern kinds of hunting:

Boar-hunting was fun. It was nothing like badger-digging or covert-shooting or fox-hunting today. Perhaps the nearest thing to it would be ferreting for rabbits -- except that you used dogs instead of ferrets, had a boar that might easily kill you, instead of a rabbit, and carried a boar-spear upon which your life depended instead of a gun. (p. 143)

The explanation assumes no knowledge of boar hunting itself, and shows White at his best in conveying information. It does, however, demand a rudimentary knowledge of ferreting, and would be meaningless to a person who knew nothing about ferrets. So although in this case no knowledge of the

medieval custom is necessary, it is explained by means of reference to the primary world.

On other occasions White does not explain every archaic or specialized term that he uses. Early in "The Sword in the Stone" Cully is described as being "not properly in yarak" (p. 11) and the reader ignorant of falconry is left to wonder at the meaning of the term. One nevertheless assumes, correctly as it turns out, that it is not White's own creation, but a genuine falconry term (meaning "in a proper condition for hunting"). In a fully realized secondary world the reader is entirely dependent on the author to explain any specialized terminology or usage. Tolkien, for example, informs his reader in a footnote that "The Sickle" is "the Hobbits' name for the Plough or the Great Bear."²¹

History as White portrays it is exotic and exciting, as successful secondary worlds are. He urges the reader to recognize the glory and achievement of the Middle Ages and to look beyond the "impudent" judgement of the nineteenth century. He selects historical detail in order to draw conclusions from a comparison of his fictional period with his contemporary reality:

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? Even if they were foolish enough to believe that the earth was the centre of the universe, do we not ourselves believe that man is the fine flower of creation? If it takes a million

²¹ Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring, p. 187.

years for a fish to become a reptile, has Man, in
our few hundred, altered out of all recognition?
(p. 569)

White's approach is typically idiosyncratic. It is unusual in the creation of secondary worlds or of alternative history to draw such direct comparisons with the primary world.

White's alternative to history is focussed most clearly on the medieval English monarchy, and his approach combines the attitudes to history characteristic of his own time with a complete subversion of historical truth. It is characteristic of traditional attitudes to history, particularly as taught in schools, to concentrate mainly on the kings. The subversion of medieval history is achieved by denying the historical existence of various English and French kings. The first pseudo-historical reference is King Pellinore's announcement of Uther Pendragon's death: "Uther the Conqueror, 1066 to 1216" (p. 198). The dates of Uther's reign show that we are not in the primary world, where it is impossible for a king to reign for one hundred and fifty years. Pellinore's phraseology parodies the practice of learning by rote the names of kings and the dates of their reigns. It implies an historical perspective and indicates that Pellinore is not a character fully integrated with the Middle Ages. The detail, apart from its comic effect, is apparently gratuitous, because in terms of the plot the most important thing about Uther is not the length of his reign, but his death. The dates did not appear in the original version of The Sword in the Stone and may have been added to emphasize the a-historical setting

of all four books, rather than as an isolated comic touch.

A more extended reference to royalty is found in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" when Merlyn attacks the conventions of medieval warfare:

Look at the Norman myths about legendary figures like the Angevin kings. From William the Conqueror to Henry the Third, they indulged in warfare seasonally. . . Look at Henry the Second borrowing money from Stephen, to pay his own troops in fighting Stephen. Look at the sporting etiquette, according to which Henry had to withdraw from a siege as soon as his enemy Louis joined the defenders inside the town, because Louis was his feudal overlord. (p. 240)

The convolutions of historical truth and myth in this passage are complex. White refers to medieval kings and their activities as mythical. He uses these "myths" to support his argument about the nature of medieval warfare as a sporting pastime akin to Victorian foxhunting. The purpose of the argument is to persuade Arthur to break the sporting convention, and bring the consequences of warfare home to its perpetrators. The technique allows White to make use of historical fact to support his interpretation of the Arthurian story, and still maintain the illusion of Arthur as the great medieval king.

It has been suggested that White's Middle Ages represent an idealization of the truth,²² but White's attitude to his historical setting was more complex than that. He tried to explain it in a letter to Sydney Cockerell:

²² Manlove, Modern Fantasy, p. 5.

the subject is too long to explain except by word of mouth, but I am trying to write of an imaginary world which was imagined in the 15th century. Malory did not imagine the armour of your century (he imagined that of his own, and I will stick to him through thick and thin) but he did imagine dragons, saints, hermits, etc.²³

White did not set out deliberately to idealize the Middle Ages from a twentieth-century point of view, rather to recapture the imagined ideal of the fifteenth century and reinterpret it for his own time. Idealization has overtones of misrepresentation and implies the suppression of unpleasant truths. This does not happen in The Once and Future King. The wicked side of humanity must be presented in order that Arthur can fight against it, although success in the final battle is denied him. The narrator adopts the attitude of one who is correcting a false impression: "as Malory pictures him, Arthur of England was the champion of a civilization which is misrepresented in the history books" (p. 564). The misrepresentation, it is implied, is the result of the nineteenth century's patronising attitude to the past. The vivid presentation of the Middle Ages supports the idea that Arthur was the embodiment of all that was positive in the medieval period:

Arthur was the heart's king of a chivalry which had reached its flower perhaps two hundred years before our antiquarian author began to work. He was the badge of everything that was good in the Middle Ages, and he had made these things himself. (p. 564)

²³ Warner, p. 133.

In this comment White summarizes the position of Arthur in the Middle Ages. There are two possible interpretations of his description of Malory as an "antiquarian author": that Malory is antiquarian from a twentieth-century point of view because he wrote so long ago, or that he was a fifteenth-century antiquarian who studied the past and based his story on it. White is aware of the power of the figure of Arthur as one who could inspire an author to revive old materials, and whose influence as a result of that revival has lasted five hundred years. Arthur is the embodiment of all the values by which the Middle Ages set the greatest store. The Once and Future King is therefore, an idealization, not because it creates a false impression of peace where none existed, but because it portrays the ideals of an age.

White's Middle Ages are a complicated creation, but they do not form a fully realized secondary world. They are too closely tied both to the historical reality and to the contemporary primary world. Moreover, the creator of a secondary world does not typically step outside it to explain some aspect of his creation. White's technique in this respect is the same as his violation of the normal expectations of the historical novel, whose narrator usually remains within the context of the fiction. The setting is not presented as an imitation of an historical reality but a secondary world rooted in a primary world of the past.

The principal element of the marvellous in White's Arthurian books is the use of animals. It is distinct from the traditional supernatural themes discussed in connection with romance. The use of animals in a co-ordinated way in "The Sword in the Stone" and The Book of Merlyn is White's most important original contribution to the Arthurian story, and gives it a dimension that the traditional material lacks.

Before examining White's approach we should examine the function of animals in fantasy generally. There has been some debate about the generic status of works which use talking animals. Frye, for example, regarded talking animals as a feature of romance,²⁴ and Tolkien made a distinction between "fairy-stories" and beast fables:

The beast-fable has, of course, a connexion with fairy stories. Beasts and birds and other creatures often talk like men in real fairy-stories. In some part (often small) this marvel derives from one of the primal 'desires' that lie near the heart of Faërie: the desire of men to hold communion with other living things. But the speech of beasts in the beast-fable, as developed into a separate branch, has little reference to that desire, and often wholly forgets it. The magical understanding by men of the proper languages of birds and beasts and trees, that is much nearer to the true purposes of Faërie. But in stories in which no human being is concerned; or in which the animals are the heroes and heroines, and men and women, if they appear, are mere adjuncts; and above all those in which the animal form is only a mask upon a human face, a device of the satirist or the preacher, in these we have beast-fable and not fairy-story.²⁵

Edmund Little has taken issue with this restriction:

²⁴ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 33.

²⁵ Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," p. 46.

The very possession of language by beasts and trees is in itself a humanising factor, particularly if they can hold rational conversations of the sort we associate with the human species. And why can animals not be the centre of a story? Tolkien writes before the appearance of Richard Adams' novel Watership Down which places rabbits at the centre of attention. Admittedly a crudely moralistic beast-fable would kill the charm of a work, just as a too blatant 'message' can kill most works of creative fiction, but Watership Down has no crude message of this kind.²⁶

Tolkien is right to exclude beast fable from fantasy, but not because the animals are the focus of the story. What prevents such work from being a fantasy is the nature of the fable, in which "the animal form is only a mask upon a human face." As Little argued, there is no reason to exclude from fantasy works that place animals at the centre of the story. Watership Down creates a secondary world of rabbit society. This world is firmly rooted in the primary world of objective knowledge about how rabbits behave, is set in a real part of Hampshire, and in the course of its action the rabbits have realistic encounters with the world of humanity, but it widens the boundaries of fantasy by placing animals at the centre of a story without creating an impossible relationship with humanity or making them represent people rather than animals. Swinfen has no difficulty in accepting talking animals as an element of fantasy, although she recognizes that "modern animal fantasy in most instances is set in the primary world and therefore rarely involves the often numinous experience of otherworlds."²⁷

²⁶ Little, pp. 5-6.

²⁷ Swinfen, p. 13.

White's use of animals in "The Sword in the Stone" and The Book of Merlyn falls between that made by Adams and the more anthropomorphic approach of a book such as The Wind in the Willows.²⁸ Tolkien's account of the function of animals in true fairy-stories accurately describes the quality of "The Sword in the Stone": "the magical understanding by men of the proper languages of birds and beasts and trees, that is much nearer to the true purposes of Faërie."²⁹ Tolkien's analysis is, however, concerned only with language, whereas White portrays much more than conversations with animals. He presents a vivid impression of the physical experience of being various animals. "The Sword in the Stone" and The Book of Merlyn both use animals for a moral purpose, but in a different way from beast-fable. Beast-fable animals represent human types and portray human moral problems, but in White's work the animals behave according to their own morality, from which the Wart can learn. There are three aspects of White's use of animals that need examination; first, the means by which White succeeds in the individual presentations, second, the overall plan and success of the use of animals and third, the change in tone between "The Sword in the Stone" and The Book of Merlyn and the effect of the revisions. The first animals to be considered are those that appear in both versions of the book.

²⁸ Kenneth Grahame, The Wind in the Willows (1908; rpt. London: Methuen, 1932).

²⁹ Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," p. 46.

The success of White's animal fantasy lies in his ability to present the Wart's experience of being an animal. The child does not simply communicate with animals, in the manner suggested by Tolkien, but becomes one of them. At the same time, however, he retains his human consciousness and experiences the differences between the two states. This enables White to present a comparison between human and animal experiences and attitudes to the world. The Wart's first dose of education comes to him and the reader unexpectedly. The Wart is anticipating the resumption of his education with very little pleasure, only taking comfort from the prospect that Merlyn "might be able to make even the old Organon interesting, particularly if he would do some magic" (p. 40). He has no idea that Merlyn is capable of turning him into a fish, as he wishes, and his thought process as he undergoes the transformation reflects the stages of his physical transformation:

The Wart found he had no clothes on. He found that he had tumbled off the drawbridge, landing with a smack on his side in the water. He found that the moat and the bridge had grown hundreds of times bigger. He knew that he was turning into a fish.
(p. 41)

The simple style is characteristic of "The Sword in the Stone" and is appropriate to the consciousness of the child who is undergoing the experience. The short sentences convey information in small doses, presenting a complex and alien experience in a straightforward way. There is thus a strong contrast between the nature of the experience and the manner of its presentation. White is interested in the physical

details of the change that takes place when a boy becomes a fish:

The Wart's legs had fused together into his backbone and his feet and toes had become a tail fin. His arms had become two more fins -- of a delicate pink -- and he had sprouted some more somewhere about his stomach. His head faced over his shoulder, so that when he bent in the middle his toes were moving towards ear instead of towards his forehead. He was a beautiful olive-green, with rather scratchy plate-armour all over him, and dark bands down his sides. He was not sure which were his sides and which were his back and front, but what now appeared to be his belly had an attractive whitish colour, while his back had a splendid great fin that could be erected for war and had spikes in it. (pp. 41-42)

The narrative presents the change that the Wart is conscious of by relating the fish's anatomy to the boy's; his fins, for example, are located "somewhere about his stomach." The boy takes great pleasure in his new body, he is "a beautiful olive-green" and has a "splendid great fin." The passage is couched in the past tense, and represents the Wart's perception of the change after it has taken place. The actual moment of transformation was occupied with the sensation of falling into the moat and the Wart's realization that he was turning into a fish.

Tolkien argued that "creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it."³⁰ White describes the factual nature of a perch, but he goes further and makes an imaginative projection of how a child could change into a fish based on the anatomical

³⁰ Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," p. 72.

similarities between human beings and fishes. The vivid presentation of the experience illustrates the dependence of fantasy on realistic description. White's imagination ranges beyond the boy's experience to encompass the world he must inhabit as a fish. In the description of the moat White creates a secondary world limited to a single episode.

The same concern with the process of change is displayed when the Wart is turned into a merlin. On this occasion, however, the process is not so smooth:

Merlyn, who had been saying the final spells under his breath, suddenly turned himself into a condor, leaving the Wart standing on tiptoe unchanged. He stood there as if he were drying himself in the sun, with a wing-spread of about eleven feet, a bright orange head and a magenta carbuncle. He looked very surprised and rather funny. (p. 72)

Merlyn's transformation is presented from the Wart's point of view rather than the magician's and the effect is comic as well as marvellous. The child's point of view is always central to the transformations as he is usually their subject. When Merlyn does get the spell right the change is presented in vivid detail:

This time the now tiny Wart felt his toes shooting out and scratching on the floor. He felt his heels rise and stick out behind and his knees draw into his stomach. His thighs became quite short. A web of skin grew from his wrists to his shoulders, while his primary feathers burst out in soft blue quills from the ends of his fingers and quickly grew. His secondaries sprouted along his forearms, and a charming little false primary sprang from the end of each thumb.

The dozen feathers of his tail, with the double deck-feathers in the middle, grew out in the twinkling of an eye, and all the covert feathers of his back and breast and shoulders slipped out of the

skin to hide the roots of the more important plumes. Wart looked quickly at Merlyn, ducked his head between his legs and had a look through there, rattled his feathers into place, and began to scratch his chin with the sharp talon of one toe.

(pp. 72-73)

There is more detail in this transformation than in the previous one, and more attention is given to the process of change rather than the result. Merlyn's magic is not instantaneous but is accomplished in perceptible stages. Having undergone a transformation once the child is aware of the kind of experience to expect. He knows in advance that he will be changed into a bird, because he has asked Merlyn to do so, and it is therefore, possible for him to pay more attention to the experience of changing than when he became a fish. The description draws on White's detailed observation of hawks, combined with the same imaginative insight into how a boy could change into a hawk. Every stage of the change is described. The first thing that the Wart feels is the change to his toes and the way they scratch on the floor. The word "scratching" conveys both the Wart's feeling of his new feet and the sound which a bird's feet, especially a hawk's, would make on a the flagged floor of a castle room. Much of the description is concerned, like that of the fish, with the parallel anatomical features of the boy and the bird. For example, "a web of skin grew from his wrists to his shoulders." This aspect of the account of the change emphasizes the evolutionary relationship between birds and humans. The Wart's pleasure in his borrowed body is communicated by the use of expressions like "soft blue quills"

and "a charming little false primary." The narrator is playing the part of educator, discussed in Chapter Five, by presenting a great deal of information about the anatomy of merlins in the process of this description. It is not enough for him to write "the boy changed into a merlin" without giving the reader the benefit of his knowledge. In the course of this passage, all but the most expert ornithologists learn about primaries and secondaries, and that the purpose of the covert feathers is "to hide the roots of the more important plumes." The final sentence completes the transformation by showing the Wart behaving like a bird, and not like a boy. He obeys the bird's instinct to rattle his feathers, and look between his legs, and finally scratches his chin in a characteristic fashion. The Wart has become a merlin and, although he must retain his human consciousness in order to benefit from the experience and communicate it to us, there is nothing in his appearance or behaviour to betray him as a human. Further evidence that the Wart is behaving entirely as a merlin should is given when Merlyn says: "Now hop on my hand -- ah, be careful and don't gripe" (p. 73). That is clearly a reflection of White's own experience of keeping various kinds of hawks.

The purpose of the transformations is to educate the Wart. He learns a particular lesson from each animal that he visits, but there is also a general lesson to be learned from the experience of transformation. The Wart always retains

his human consciousness during a transformation, and strives to conceal his human identity from the animals. Only among the geese does he feel sufficient confidence in Lyo-lyok to confess the truth to her (p. 170). By retaining his human consciousness the boy/animal is able to relate his experience as an animal to his primary world.

The practical lesson that Wart learns from his visits to the animals is empathy. He learns, for example, how a fish must use its body to swim, and how the surface of the moat looks from below. This is a valuable lesson for a king, because once he has pulled the sword from the stone he can no longer share experiences with equals. The experience of learning to live in an alien body, coupled with his innate compassion, gives Arthur a close understanding of the people around him. His appreciation of the way that Lancelot and Guenever feel, for example, makes him reluctant to take action against them. Similarly his understanding of the complex factors that influence the Orkney brothers prevents his taking strong measures against them even when they offend repeatedly against the code of the Round Table by the murders of Pellinore, Morgause, and Lamorak.

There are, however, other lessons to be learned from the animals. Each of the creatures that the Wart visits has a different approach to life, conditioned by the practical necessities of their environment. In the moat he meets the pike whose power is so great that it cannot be expressed in a

single name or title. Merlyn refers to him first as "Emperor of these purlieus" and the Wart then asks:

"Is he the King of the Moat?"

"He is. Old Jack they call him, and some call him Black Peter, but for the most part they do not mention him by name at all. They just call him Mr. P. You will see what it is to be a king." (p. 47)

There is a tradition of mystery about the true names of the very powerful. In The Lord of the Rings, for example, characters are often reluctant to name Sauron, and he is generally referred to as the Dark Lord, the Lord of Mordor, or the Enemy. Similarly, the Wart's own name is not revealed until the end of the book. The encounter with Mr. P. himself is not as memorable as some of the other animal encounters, or even as the Wart's learning to swim as a fish and Merlyn's ministrations to the neurotic roach. This is perhaps because the impression of the given of the pike is given through the narrator rather than through the Wart. There is a long description of the fish in which his character is reflected in his appearance:

The great body, shadowy and almost invisible among the stems, ended in 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. (p. 47)

The narrator's detailed account of Mr. P. is balanced by the brevity of the boy's response: "the Wart thought to himself that he did not care for Mr. P." (p. 47). The pike is a personification of absolute power and as such is both less fully characterized and much less attractive than most of the

other animals. In all his visits to the animals the Wart never draws direct lessons from his experience, it is stored up for the future while his main concern is to enjoy the experience. Apart, however, from the illustration of the tyranny of an individual, the Wart also learns to judge environments by the appropriate standards rather than by his own fixed standards. His initial view of the moat is of a cool and pleasant place where he has often swum with Kay. Merlyn, however, corrects this impression:

"You swim along," said the tench, "as if there was nothing to be afraid of in the world. Don't you see that this place is exactly like the forest which you had to come through to find me?" (p. 46)

The Wart learns the lesson of scale; that something which is no threat to him as a human can be a matter of life and death as a fish. It is another aspect of empathy.

All the animals that the Wart visits are in their wild state, except the hawks. They form a militaristic community governed by ritual and a very strict hierarchy based on that given in The Boke of St. Albans. White refers to the hierarchy again when Arthur presents Lancelot with a jerrfalcon:

this was a great compliment, for jerrfalcones were only supposed to be used by kings. At any rate that is what the Abbess Juliana Berners tells us -- perhaps incorrectly. An emperor was allowed an eagle, a king could have a jerrfalcon, and after that there was the peregrine for an earl, the merlin for a lady, the goshawk for a yeoman, the sparrow hawk for a priest, and the musket for a holy-water clerk. (p. 346-7)³¹

³¹ See Rachel Hands, English Hawking and Hunting in 'The

White gives a much more detailed explanation of the functioning of the mews in "The Sword in the Stone" than he does of the Round Table later in the book. The social conventions governing the human community of knights are implied rather than presented directly. White, for example, does not use the tradition, so frequently invoked in Malory, of Arthur's waiting for a marvel before beginning his Pentecost feast. The visit to the mews, then, is White's presentation of a noble society bound by tradition. The use of the hawks to represent this aspect of chivalry allows White to limit its direct influence on his characters and free them to suffer their personal tragedies later in the book. The influence of the hawks is, nevertheless, pervasive, and birds of prey appear at various key points in The Once and Future King. Lancelot and Guenever's love is precipitated by hawking, and the narrator comments: "hawking, as James the First pointed out, is an extreme stirrer up of passions. It is because the hawks themselves are furious creatures, and the people who associate with them catch it" (p. 346). In the opening chapters of "The Candle in the Wind" a number of hawks appear. In the cloisters of Orkney palace are "a jerfalcon, a goshawk, a falcon and her tiercel, and four little merlins" as well as "an enormous eagle-owl" (p. 547). When Gawaine, Caheris, and Gareth join their brothers they have returned from hawking with a juvenile falcon, which Gareth wants to

Boke of St. Albans' (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 54-55, ll. 1164-1203. White's suggestion that the hierarchy was not rigidly adhered to is supported by Rachel Hands, "The Names of All Manner of Hawks, and to whom they belong," Notes and Queries, NS 18 (1971), 85-88.

call Lancelotta (pp. 554-5). In the final chapter with Arthur, in his tent is "an ill-bred falcon, who was subject to the vice of screaming" (p. 665). The appearance of falcons at these, and other, points in the book all recall Arthur's experience with the birds as a boy. There is no crude symbolic relationship between falcons and knights, but the birds parallel some aspects of knightly society.

The boy learns a number of lessons among the hawks. He sees potential of power and nobility to be debased by snobbery. The peregrine, for example, is less concerned about the Wart's personal qualities than his family background. His claim to be "one of the Merlins of the Forest Sauvage" (p. 75), as truthful an answer as he can make in the circumstances, does not satisfy her:

"There are the Yorkshire Merlins," said the honorary colonel in her slow voice at last, "and the Welsh Merlins, and the McMerlins of the North. Then there are the Salisbury ones, and several from the neighbourhood of Exmoor, and the O'Merlins of Connaught. I do not think I have heard of any family in the Forest Sauvage."

"It would be a cadet branch, Madam," said Balan, "I dare say." (p. 75)

The phraseology echoes Bertie Wooster's notoriously snobbish Aunt Agatha: "I wonder which Wilberforces that would be. There are two main branches of the family -- the Essex Wilberforces and the Cumberland Wilberforces. I believe there is also a cadet branch somewhere in Shropshire."³² The echo

³² P.G. Wodehouse "The Indian Summer of an Uncle" in Very Good, Jeeves!, (1930; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p. 226.

of Wodehouse gives the reader a humorous context for the peregrine's snobbery. She is, however, no less threatening to the Wart.

The presentation of the rest of the hawks is also humorous, but it nevertheless suggests the stress that the power of tradition and social convention can inflict on the individual. The unfortunate sparrow-hawk is humiliated before the entire company when he is forced to admit that he has eaten his tirings:

Nobody said anything. The dereliction of duty was too terrible for words. All stood on two feet and turned their blind heads toward the culprit. Not a word of reproach was spoken. Only, during an utter silence of five minutes, they could hear the incontinent priest snivelling and hiccoughing to himself. (p. 77)

The power of the "silver silence" (p. 75) to intimidate and humiliate is greater than words. Cully is also a victim of the social pressure of the mews, as Balan explains:

Colonel Cully is not quite right in his wits. It is his liver, we believe, but the kestrel says it is the constant strain of living up to her ladyship's standard. He says 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. (p. 77)

That Cully could have been driven mad by the invoking of a social convention indicates its power among the hawks. Their lives are governed by ritual, to which the Wart, as a new officer, must submit.³³ He must go through the catechism, the

³³ Cf. "a subaltern had to answer to the name of

oath, and finally the ordeal. His success in the ordeal reveals qualities in the boy, such as level-headedness and courage, which he will need when he becomes king.

The hawks have a strong military tradition, but in addition their speech and hymns reveal them as heirs to the broad tradition of English literature. Cully's speech is littered with allusions and half-remembered quotations, such as "is this a damned dagger that I see before me, the handle towards my hand? Damned spot. Now, Cully, thou hast but one brief hour to live, and then thou must be damned perpetually" (p. 74). The goshawk's state of mind leads him to recall some appropriate lines from the bloodier parts of Elizabethan tragedy.³⁴ The hymns that the hawks sing are adapted from other sources; the Ordeal Hymn is a variation of Dunbar's "Timor Mortis conturbat me" and the Triumph Song is based on Thomas Love Peacock's "The War Song of Dinas Vawr."³⁵ In giving a literary basis to much of the hawks' ritual and speech White places them in the established literary tradition and does not therefore need to create a tradition specific to the hawks. The possible disadvantage of this approach is that the hawks could be made to seem too human. White avoids this pitfall, however, by selecting material which reflects the

'wart"', Robert Graves Goodbye To All That (1929; 2nd ed. London: Cassell and Company, 1957), p. 112.

³⁴ Respectively Macbeth II i ll. 33-34; V i l. 32; Dr. Faustus V ii ll. 143-4.

³⁵ Thomas Love Peacock, The Misfortunes of Elphin in The Novels of Thomas Love Peacock ed. David Garnett (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948), p. 603.

warlike and disciplined culture of the birds. Any animal fantasy faces the danger of simplifying or, in some cases, sentimentalizing the animals. White's great respect for the hawks prevents this so that the final impression of the birds is of their nobility and fidelity to their own standards. The Wart's reaction when he awakes the next morning is perhaps the best summary: "what a horrible, grand crew!" (p. 82).

The two versions of "The Sword in the Stone" have only one other animal transformation in common: the Wart's final visit, to the badger. On his way to the badger's sett the Wart, distressed at learning that this is to be his last excursion, decides not to visit the badger, but to go and experience the wildness of the forest alone: "as I am a wild beast now, I will be a wild beast, and there it is" (p. 187). White characteristically takes the opportunity to teach his reader something about badgers. The information is presented directly using the second person, for example, "if you are feeling desperate, a badger is a good thing to be" (p. 187), so that the reader is encouraged to imagine what it is like to be a badger, not just to imagine what it was like for the Wart to be one. The Wart attempts to give reign to what he assumes are the brutal realities of being a badger, and threatens to eat the hedge-pig. However, his attempt is unsuccessful because it is not usual for animals to warn their prey that they are about to eat them. As a result the reader has the impression that the Wart's heart is not really in the business of tyranny, even over a flea-ridden hedgehog. Nevertheless,

the badger persists in his persecution of the creature, using uncharacteristic language which suggests that he is playing a rôle: "Hedge-pig," said the Wart remorselessly, "forebear to whine, neither thrice nor once" (p. 188). When the hedgehog offers to sing, however, the charade stops because the boy is too interested in the phenomenon of a singing hedgehog to continue with his rôle playing. The hedgehog proves to have a rather limited repertoire but still manages to placate the tyrant.

The hedgehog's language is similar in some ways to Cully's. As a peasant, he does not share Cully's access to a literary heritage; his speech is full instead of proverbs, stock phrases, and clichés, for example: "Us shall bless the saints and board of governors for thee and for thy most kindly chops, so long as fleas skip nor urchins climb up chimbleys" (p. 188). These expressions, which on first impression have the air of the random use of catch-phrases by an illiterate peasant, are in fact appropriate to the building-up of this character. Blessing the saints and the board of governors suggests the twin function of church and local secular authority in the lives of the rural poor in the past. The reference to fleas is particularly appropriate to a hedgehog. The final expression is a pun on the word urchin; in its meaning of "child" the word is often used to refer to those children who worked as chimney-sweeps, but its original meaning is hedgehog. The character thus created is a countryman of independent spirit and little education, who

respects the gentry but recognizes their limitations. His judgement of badgers is that "they go a-barrowing about with no harm in their hearts, Lor' bless 'em, but doan't they fair give you a nip without a-noticing of it" (p. 190).

On reaching the badger's sett the Wart tells his host about his encounter with the hedgehog. The badger's reaction indicates the reality of the natural world: "I'm afraid I generally just munch them up" (p. 192). The badger does not inflict suffering on his prey as the Wart had tried to do by intimidating the hedgehog. He simply eats them because that is a natural thing for badgers to do.³⁶ The abuse of power inherent in a strong creature humiliating a weak one is revealed to be a human characteristic and not a part of natural predation. The Wart makes a mistake in trying to work out his human frustrations in what he wrongly believes to be the way of a badger. Eventually, however, his own better nature proves stronger than his wish to experiment with tyranny.

Initially the badger claims that he can teach the Wart only two things: "to dig, and to love your home. These are the true end of philosophy" (p. 191). For the badger the two things are inextricably linked because he, or his ancestors, have dug their own home. As usual White uses the introduction of a new creature as an opportunity to pass on information about its habits:

³⁶ Cf. Royal Society for Nature Conservation, Focus on Badgers (Lincoln: R.S.N.C., n.d.).

Badgers are not like foxes. They have a special midden where they put out their used bones and rubbish, proper earth closets, and bedrooms whose bedding they turn out frequently, to keep it clean.
(p. 191)

This passage draws attention to the similarities between badgers and humanity, and the badger is the most humanized of all the animals in "The Sword in the Stone." His attitude to hedgehogs is appropriate to a badger, but when he offers to read the Wart his treatise it is clear that this is not simply a portrait of a badger endowed with language. Furthermore, White's badger is unusual in being "a bachelor at the moment" (p. 192). Badgers commonly live in large family groups and perhaps the solitary state of this badger is another example of White's reluctance to introduce unnecessary female characters. Unlike the other animals in "The Sword in the Stone," the badger teaches the Wart an explicit lesson about mankind in relation to the other animals. The lessons taught by Mr. P., the hawks, and the various other animals discussed below, are all appropriate to those animals. As a mammal, however, the badger has a closer link to mankind than any of the other animals visited by the Wart. His treatise is the culmination of the evolutionary theme in "The Sword in the Stone."

Badger's treatise is a reworking of part of the Genesis creation myth. It is ironic that he should regard an interpretation of that myth as "just the thing to top off an education" (p. 193) which was built upon the theory of

evolution. In "The Ill-Made Knight" the narrator explains the theory behind Arthur's education:

His teacher had educated him as the child is educated in the womb, where it lives the history of man from fish to mammal -- and like the child in the womb, he had been protected with love meanwhile. The effect of such an education was that he had grown up without any of the useful accomplishments for living -- without malice, vanity, suspicion, cruelty, and the commoner forms of selfishness.

(p. 406)

During his education the Wart's awareness of the overall structure of Merlyn's programme is revealed in his comment to Archimedes during the flying lesson: "I can see why the reptiles who had given up being fishes decided to become birds" (p. 164). Neither version of "The Sword in the Stone" reveals a rigid adherence to an evolutionary pattern, because the animals are chosen not for their place in evolution but because White was personally familiar with their habits.

There is a considerable difference between the animal episodes in the two versions. In the original version of "The Sword in the Stone" the sequence of animal transformations ran: fish, hawk, grass snake, owl (the visit to Athene) and badger. In the second version the grass snake and owl have been replaced by the ants and wild geese which were originally part of The Book of Merlyn. The revisions make detailed changes and also affect the broad theme of the book. The first version shows more concern with humanity's relation to the earth and its inhabitants, the second with relationships

between men, as groups and individuals.

The Wart's visit to the grass snake gives him an insight into life of a persecuted creature and teaches him not to judge by appearances. Part of the White's reason for replacing this episode in the later version is perhaps expressed in Merlyn's comment before the metamorphosis:

It isn't much of a life. I don't think you'll get anything very exciting to happen to you. This chap probably only eats about once a week or once a fortnight, and the rest of the time he dreams. Still, if I turned you into one, you might get him to talk. It won't be more than that.

(The Sword in the Stone p. 196)

The grass snake episode does not have the power of either the threatening ants or the spectacular wild geese, but is successful in using the vivid presentation of an animal's experience to teach the boy an important lesson. The account of a snake's sense of hearing is typically of White's ability to enter imaginatively into life of an animal.

He had an ear anyway, which was conscious of deep roaring sounds that were approximate to the noises which he had learned as a boy. For instance, if somebody bangs on the side of the bath or if the pipes begin to gurgle when your ears are under water, you hear sounds which are different to those you would hear in a normal position. But you would soon get accustomed to these sounds, and connect the roaring and bumbling with water-pipes, if you kept your head under water for long. In fact, although you heard a different kind of noise, you would still be hearing the pipes which human beings hear in the upper air.

(The Sword in the Stone p. 197-98)

The grass snake is a gentle creature living in fear because it is frequently mistaken for an adder and killed. It

leads a contemplative life, thinking over the ancient legends of its race. As a reptile, the grass snake, represents of one of the oldest groups of animals on the earth, and the individual that the Wart meets is heir to a long tradition. He introduces the story of evolution to the Wart and places man in the context of evolutionary history:

Look at that ridiculous *H. sapiens barbatus* which gave me such a fright just now. It was born when? Ten or twenty thousand years ago. What do the tens and twenties matter? The earth cooled. The sea covered it. It was a hundred million years ago that Life came to the Great Sea, and the fishes bred within it. They were the oldest people, the Fish. Their children climbed out of it and stood upon the bosky shores, and they were the Amphibia like our friends the newts. (The Sword in the Stone p. 202)

The main lesson for the Wart is found in the story of St. George, which the snake tells from the dragon's point of view. The use of human tradition here contrasts with the militaristic culture of the hawks. The snake's story reveals the fundamental opposition between his ancestors and mankind. *H. sapiens armatus georgius sanctus* is the direct ancestor of those people Merlyn had criticized earlier:

"Everybody kills them," said Merlyn indignantly. "Some by-our-lady fool once said that you could tell an adder because it had a V on its head, which stood for viper. It would take you five minutes to find the mark on a adder's head anyway, but these helpless beauties with their bright yellow black-bordered V get bashed to death in consequence."
(The Sword in the Stone p. 196)

T. natrix's stories show him to be the inheritor of an ancient store of wisdom,³⁷ and man, in contrast, as an immature brute.

³⁷ Cf. the search for the oldest animal in the world in Culwch ac Olwen.

A similar lesson is taught by the visit to Athene, but her wisdom reaches back to the beginning of the world, before the animals. The episode opens with the Wart learning to fly under the tuition of Archimedes. It is the first occasion on which Archimedes has appeared behaving as an owl does naturally. He is the only naturally wild creature that appears consistently in a human environment, but White is generally successful in maintaining the illusion that he is an owl. His first appearance, when he takes offence at the prospect of being called Archie, establishes both the special dignity of owls generally, accorded them because of their descent, and the generosity of Archimedes in forgiving the Wart his error. In the discussion of birds when the owl is asked to name his favourite bird he replies:

"I think that I must prefer the pigeon."

"To eat?"

"I was leaving that side of it out," said the owl in civilised tones. "Actually the pigeon is the favourite dish of all raptors if they are big enough to take her, but I was thinking of nothing but domestic habits." (p. 157)

Archimedes is thus established as a real owl, but one whose traditional attribute of wisdom is highly developed, and who additionally possesses the power of speech.

Archimedes's mother, Athene, allows the Wart to experience an owl's dream. The dreams are, as Archimedes explains, "such as we gain our wisdom from in the sighing of the night" (*The Sword in the Stone* p. 264). The dreams extend the Wart's education beyond the animal world and take in the

whole history of the earth and its plant life. The dream of the trees reveals that they too have speech:

We cannot hear the trees talking, except as a vague noise of roaring and hushing which we attribute to the wind in the leaves, because they talk too slowly for us. These noises are really the syllables and vowels of the trees. (The Sword in the Stone p. 265)

White imagines tree speech much as Tolkien does:

He [Treebeard] hummed to himself deeply and thoughtfully, but Merry and Pippin caught no proper words: it sounded like boom, boom, rumboom, boorar, boom boom, dahrar boom boom, dahrar boom, and so on with a constant change of note and rhythm. Now and again they thought they heard an answer, a hum or a quiver of sound, that seemed to come out of the earth, or from the boughs above their heads, or perhaps from the boles of the trees.³⁹

Next the Wart is shown the "dream of the stones" (The Sword in the Stone p. 269) which reveals the geological history of the planet. The culmination of the dream shows that mankind is capable of perverting even the rocks which compose the earth itself:

In the ultimate twinkling of an eye, far tinier in time than the last millimetre on a six-foot rule, there came a man. He split up the one pebble which remained of all that mountain with blows; then made an arrowhead of it, and slew his brother.

(The Sword in the Stone p. 272)

The grass snake and Athene episodes are flawed. They are episodic and thematically repetitive. Certainly they do not bear comparison with the ants and the wild geese. Nevertheless, the Wart's education is the poorer for losing the lessons about man's exploitation and destruction of the

³⁹ Tolkien, The Two Towers, p. 82.

rest of creation; and the book as a whole is the poorer for losing a character as attractive and vividly portrayed as T. matrix.

The ants and the wild geese were originally part of The Book of Merlyn. They were the two transformations that Merlyn devised for Arthur on the night before his final battle. When The Book of Merlyn was abandoned, White incorporated the two episodes into "The Sword in the Stone," with some minor changes reflecting the different age of the protagonist. The two episodes balance each other, in both versions, but they do not harmonize with the original theme of The Sword in the Stone and as a result there is a change of thematic emphasis. The visits to the ants and the wild geese are, however, the strongest of White's animal fantasies.

The Wart's transformation into an ant is exceptional in "The Sword in the Stone" in that it is the only one he does not enjoy. His first impression of the ants' world is the notice "EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY" (p. 121) which has a disturbing effect on him:

He read the notice with dislike, though he did not understand its meaning. He thought to himself: I will explore a little, before going in. For some reason the notice gave him a reluctance to go, making the rough tunnel look sinister. (p. 121)

His subsequent experience confirms his initial doubts. He becomes conscious of the ant music, and for the first time he finds the physical experience of being an animal unpleasant:

He liked them at first, especially the ones about Love-dove-above, until he found that they did not vary. As soon as they had been finished once, they were begun again. After an hour or two, they began to make him feel sick inside. (p. 121)

The world of the ants is far more alien to the Wart than any of his other experiences and the contrast between the boy's natural curiosity and liveliness and the oppressive community of the ants creates a particularly vivid impression. His frustration at being unable to ask the ants questions because "their language had not got the words in which humans are interested -- so that it would have been impossible to ask them whether they believed in Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" (p. 126-7) is a powerful image of negation. The ant community is a parody of a totalitarian state, complete with the adoration given to an all-powerful leader and the fallacious propaganda. However, the reader's dislike for the ants' social system is based more on a recognition of that regime as totalitarian than on the natural qualities of the ants.

François Gallix has shown that White researched the natural history of ants carefully, but only after he had already decided to use them as examples of true warfare in nature.³⁹ White's main source of information was Julian Huxley's Ants,⁴⁰ but as Gallix points out, White chose to

³⁹ François Gallix "T.H. White et la Légende du Roi Arthur: De la Fantaisie Animale au Moralisme Politique" études Anglaises: Grand-Bretagne -- États-Unis, 34 no. 2 (1981) 192-203.

⁴⁰ Julian Huxley, Ants (London: Ernest Benn, Benn's Sixpenny Library, no. 142, 1930).

ignore Huxley's warning that:

Innumerable comparisons have been made between human society and the social organization of the ant, bee or termite; theories have been advanced and morals pointed. . . almost without exception the moral has been false, the analogy misleadingly used.⁴¹

Examples of information drawn from Huxley's book include the facts that ants yawn (p. 121), that they dispose of corpses outside the nest (pp. 123-4), that they share food from the crop (p. 125-6), and the gruesome story of the *Bothriomyrmex* queen sawing the head off her predecessor (p. 126).⁴² However, the genuine details of the natural history of the ants are not the most repulsive things about them. What makes the social order of the ants a nightmare is the lack of personal privacy - even of thoughts - the blind admiration of the ants for their leader, and their willingness to believe propaganda. These are all human characteristics which White has imposed upon the ants. The insects are an appropriate species on which to graft these characteristics because the individual is less important, in terms of survival, than the community. Neither are they particularly attractive to most people in the way that hawks, badgers, or hedgehogs are.

The wild geese personify all the positive values denied by the social order of the ants. They are individualists but they are able to co-operate when necessary, for example when one bird acting as look-out while the others feed (pp. 170-

⁴¹ Julian Huxley, *Ants* quoted by Gallix "T.H. White et la Légende du Roi Arthur," p. 196.

⁴² Julian Huxley, p. 32, p. 33, p. 23, and p. 53.

71). The evocation of the migration of the geese, from their starting place on the mud flats of the east coast across the North Sea to Siberia, is White's best presentation of the life of an animal. The story of the geese has a complex history within White's work as a whole. It began life as a story called "Grief for the Grey Geese" after goose-shooting expeditions in Norfolk and Lincolnshire in late 1938 in which a goose shooter turns against his human companions and helps the geese to escape.⁴³ That White should have gained his detailed knowledge of geese in the process of trying to kill them recalls Surtees's comment about Facey Romford:

He had an intuitive knowlege of the nature and habits of the animal, and seemed to say to himself as he approached a cover -- his little pig eyes raking it in all directions -- "Now, Francis Romford, moy beloved friend, if you were a fox, where would you lie?"⁴⁴

In White the hunter and the naturalist are inextricably mixed. A hunter needs a detailed knowledge of his prey and Warner shows that White's observation of the geese and their environment during late 1938 was the inspiration for the portrait of the geese in The Once and Future King.

The geese episode opens with one of the few descriptions of landscape in The Once and Future King. The marshland is an alien landscape and as remote from common experience as

⁴³ Warner, pp. 114-7 quotes a passage from the unpublished book which is clearly the original of the description of the wind on the salt marsh.

⁴⁴ R.S. Surtees Mr. Facey Romford's Hounds (London: Bradbury, Agnew and Co., n.d.), p. 159.

some more overt secondary worlds. This, however, is not the human world: "In the human world, the wind comes from somewhere, and goes through somewhere, and, as it goes, it passes through somewhere -- through trees or streets or hedgerows. This wind came from nowhere" (p. 166). This environment is even more alien to the Wart than that of the ants, where he was at least able to identify it as a boulder-strewn desert. The landscape itself is featureless and the wind takes over from the normal features of scenery.

Most of the animals in "The Sword in the Stone" are presented affectionately, with the exception of the ants, but only with the geese does the narrator state his feelings explicitly: "there were about four hundred of them in the vicinity -- very beautiful creatures, the wild White-fronted Geese, whom, once he has seen them close, no man ever forgets" (p. 167). Throughout the episode the human perspective is retained. The portrait of the geese combines the point of view and response of the boy/goose and that of an observer:

The dawn, the sea-dawn and the mastery of ordered flight, were of such intense beauty that the boy was moved to sing. He wanted to cry a chorus to life, and, since a thousand geese were on the wing about him, he had not long to wait. The lines of these creatures, wavering like smoke upon the sky as they breasted the sunrise, were all at once in music and in laughter. (p. 169)

The image of "smoke upon the sky" reflects the position of the earth-bound observer watching the geese and knowing that they will soon disappear. The boy's elation and impulse to sing is the response of the observer imagining he could join the geese

and remain with them in their flight. By evoking the experience of watching the birds from the ground, White plays upon the urge which most people have to fly like a bird, thus encouraging the reader's imaginative participation in the flight of the geese. The description of the migration across the North Sea includes some vivid and chilling passages, for example; when the flocks pass through the clouds:

Wraiths of mist suddenly moving like serpents in the air would coil about them for a second. Grey damp would be around them, and the sun, a copper penny would fade away. The wings next to their own wings would shade into vacancy, until each bird was a lonely sound in cold annihilation, a presence after uncreation. (p. 177)

The power of the description, which is much longer than the passage quoted, lies in its pace. The entry into the clouds is presented slowly stage by stage, with attention given to various senses. The sun and the other birds disappear from sight. The birds feel the change in temperature and the damp of the clouds. The most striking element, however, is the loss of sound contact between the birds, when the mass of wing beats is reduced to just one.

The brilliance of White's description of the marsh and the migration flight supports his characterization of the geese and the presentation of their social organisation. It is a good example of the importance of realism within fantasy. Among the geese the Wart receives the open and generous friendship of Lyo-lyok, who does her best to answer his questions although she finds some of them strange and

repulsive. She is in direct contrast to the ants who were incapable of understanding the questions that the Wart wanted to ask. The Wart's impulse to confess his humanity to her is an indication of his confidence that the geese are strong and open-minded enough to accept him without feeling fear, as T. matrix would have done, or wishing to persecute him, as the ants would have done. Lyo-lyok teaches him that the geese are generally pacific; they have only natural enemies such as jer-falcons, peregrines, foxes, and ermines, and that the only fighting among the geese takes place in order to choose a mate: "the men fight sometimes, about their wives and that. Of course there is no bloodshed -- only scuffling, to find the better man" (p. 171). She tells him about the social organization of the birds:

They did not own things in common. Any goose who found something nice to eat considered it his own, and would peck any other one who tried to thief it. At the same time, no goose claimed any exclusive territorial right in any part of the world -- except its nest, and that was private property. (p. 173)

Here Lyo-lyok is articulating White's ideas for a pacific society. Her explanation is structured to emphasize the difference between the geese and the ants. She also explains to the Wart the method of choosing leaders among the geese, and the importance of their rôle. The goose leaders literally lead their flocks in migration so the future of the whole group depends upon their efficiency. Therefore the geese choose the most capable and experienced goose, who is usually the eldest son of the previous leader, but the geese are not bound by tradition should the obvious successor prove

unsuitable. The geese's method of choosing a leader is clearly not intended to foreshadow Arthur's accession.

The ants and the wild geese form a pair of contrasting social systems which the Wart experiences at first hand. He learns about the different ways in which an individual can form part of a society and about the shared values which can lead to war. Merlyn believes that "education is experience" (p. 41), and the Wart's experience of the oppressive lack of individual freedom among the ants and the free flight of the geese make the lessons so much sharper. Fantasy depends for its success on the vivid presentation of imaginary events. White is able through his knowledge of all the animals in "The Sword in the Stone" to persuade the reader that the Wart is transformed into another creature and that he experiences the world through their senses. Each of the animals teaches the boy a specific lesson, all of which are necessary to the future king, but all the episodes help him to see the world from different angles and teach him that the human perspective is not the only one. The practical value of his education is symbolized by the presence of the animals, helping the Wart to pull the sword from the stone:

There were badgers and nightingales and vulgar crows and hares and wild geese and falcons and fishes and dogs and dainty unicorns and solitary wasps and corkindrills and hedgehogs and griffins and the thousand other animals he had met. They loomed around the church wall, the lovers and helpers of the Wart, and they all spoke solemnly in turn. Some of them had come from the banners in the church, where they were painted in heraldry, some from the waters and the sky and the fields about -- but all, down to the smallest shrew mouse, had come to help on account of love. (p. 208)

The animals' response to the Wart is a reflection of the love which is the basis of his own character. Merlyn's magical education does not change the boy fundamentally but builds on the foundation of generosity and affection. The animal fantasy of "The Sword in the Stone" is an important element in the development of Arthur's character, and therefore in The Once and Future King as a whole. Its confinement to that section of the book usually regarded as a children's book does not indicate that the fantasy is in any way trivial. White uses it to explore the issues of war and man's relationships with the natural world.

Historical fantasy and animal fantasy are the vehicles for the exploration of some of the most serious themes of The Once and Future King. By turning history inside out White leads the reader to re-examine common assumptions about history and to look not just at the brutal realities of the Middle Ages, although White does not attempt to deny these, but also at the ideals and achievements that existed even in the midst of the brutality. White's animal fantasies similarly present a different view of their subjects. In showing natural history from the point of view of the observed rather than the observer White fulfills the dreams of many naturalists. Only by being an animal would it be possible to understand their lives fully. More recent discoveries might refute some of the facts on which White's accounts are based, but the strength of his portrayals lies not in factual

accuracy but in imaginative insight into the life of an animal. Our ancestors are in one respect like animals: they cannot refute the false assumptions we make about them. White's fantasy may not allow either ancestors or animals to say much for themselves, but it successfully creates alternative assumptions.

Chapter Nine

Elements of Utopia in White's Arthurian Books

Throughout The Once and Future King White shows his hero, Arthur, engaged on his personal quest to find the "antidote for War."¹ He experiments with different strategies to control the brutality which seems to be natural to most of his subjects. It is revealing, therefore, to consider whether Arthur's quest is an attempt to create an ideal society like those portayed in utopian fiction.

Utopian fiction forms a more limited genre than those so far considered. Its broad structure, as an extended prose fiction, indicates that it is a type of novel, but it forms a distinct subgenre within that kind. The main distinguishing feature of subgenre is subject and all utopias present a detailed account of an imaginary society. For the purposes of the present genre-study utopias and dystopias can be treated together, as both present imaginary societies. The priorities of a utopia are not to create a realistic social background as in a novel or historical novel, nor to present a fully realized secondary world as in fantasy, but to show the

¹ White, letter to L.J. Potts dated 6th December 1940, in Letters to a Friend, p. 117.

workings of the imaginary social order. The closest genre to utopia is fantasy, because it too creates an imaginary world. They are nevertheless distinct. The secondary world of fantasy may reveal its social structure in the course of the book, but the exploration of the workings of society does not take priority in fantasy. Furthermore, whereas the characters of fantasy are not necessarily human, those of utopia are. The main generic feature of a utopia or dystopia is its exploration how human society may be organized, and an examination of the effects of such organization on individuals.

Like many of the genres discussed so far, utopias are difficult to define precisely. The long history of the form and its appearance in so many languages, described by Manuel and Manuel,² indicates that the utopia has been found to answer a need across many centuries and in various countries. Perhaps the persistence of the form is part of the reason why it resists definition. Indeed, Manuel and Manuel decline to provide such a definition.³ Miriam Eliav-Feldon is more willing to do so:

A utopia is an invitation to perceive the distance between things as they are and things as they should be. It is a presentation of a positive and possible alternative to the social reality, intended as a model to be emulated or aspired to. Since it is an appeal to perfect the social environment, it

² Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979).

³ Manuel and Manuel, p. 5.

expresses explicit and implicit criticism of the things as they are. ⁴

The reason for the two different attitudes to definition lies in the scope of the two studies. The comprehensive approach of Manuel and Manuel prevents them from reaching a satisfactory definition which would apply to all utopias throughout the history of western literature. Eliav-Feldon's work is more restricted in subject and therefore more suited to precise definition. In the present study the main features of some well-known utopias will be described, and then their relevance to The Once and Future King will be discussed.

Utopian fiction presents a portrait of an imaginary society, usually as a comment on the society of the author, for example, Utopia, News From Nowhere, and Erewhon.⁵ The society described is often an ideal, but it should be noted that dystopias, such as Brave New World or Nineteen Eighty-Four⁶ function in the same way as utopias. The essential feature of a utopia is that the society is different from that of the author, but in some way reflects or projects it.

⁴ Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Realistic Utopias: The Ideal Imaginary Societies of the Renaissance 1516-1630 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 1.

⁵ Sir Thomas More, Utopia ed. Edward Surtz and J.H. Hexter, Vol. IV of The Complete Works of Sir Thomas More (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965); William Morris, News From Nowhere: Or an Epoch of Rest Being Some Chapters From a Utopian Romance (1891; rpt. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907); Samuel Butler, Erewhon: or Over the Range 2nd ed. (1872; rpt. London: Page and Co., 1922).

⁶ Aldous Huxley, Brave New World (1932; rpt. London: Chatto and Windus, 1966); George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel (1949; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

Erewhon, for example, is not an ideal, but Butler presents its absurdities, such as the belief that illness is criminal and that criminality is a medical condition, in order to sharpen his readers' awareness of the strength of convention in Victorian England. Utopias are usually set in another part of the earth, as in Utopia or Erewhon, or in the future, as in News From Nowhere or Brave New World. Those set in another part of the earth are often presented as traveller's tales and claim the objectivity of an outsider's account of a society. This kind of objectivity is absent from a book like Nineteen Eighty-Four, and is present in Brave New World only in the character of Savage, who is an outsider in a different sense to the narrator of Erewhon or Guest in News From Nowhere. Savage is the incarnation of the failure to repress the emotions and experiences which are repressed as a matter of course outside the reservation. He is not, therefore, an objective outsider.

A feature shared by the narrators or protagonists of all the works so far mentioned is their powerlessness in the new society; the best they can do is escape, like Bernard and Helmholtz in Brave New World or the narrator of Erewhon. On the other hand, Guest in News From Nowhere is powerless to remain, although he wants to. Utopia and News From Nowhere both describe fictional societies and their institutions. However, they reveal the connections between individuals and institutions and show the ways in which the fictional society functions. The descriptive element is less predominant in

Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four, in which the plot plays a greater part in revealing the functioning of society. The features of the fictional society, whether good or bad, are often closely related to the author's own world. William Morris in News From Nowhere, for example, shows a preoccupation with the pleasure of producing beautiful objects, rooted in his own skills and his concern at the shoddiness of Victorian mass production. Similarly the shortages of food and other goods in Nineteen Eighty-Four reflect rationing in post-war Britain.

Utopias set in the future tend to be more concerned with the faults of the author's own world than with any attempt to predict a possible future world in the manner of some science fiction. Rex Warner's The Aerodrome,⁷ although not fully a utopia, shares this feature with the works already discussed. The Aerodrome is relevant to the present discussion because it presents England just before the moment of change to a dystopian society in which the traditional values of the Village are overthrown by those of the Air Force. It stands on the border of dystopian fiction and is a useful point of comparison between utopias, dystopias, and The Once and Future King.

This brief description shows some common features of utopias and dystopias relevant to The Once and Future King. White's book is not a description of a future society or one

⁷ Rex Warner, The Aerodrome: A Love Story (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1941).

in a different part of the globe, nor does it present a complete description of a society. It does, however, have a number of the features of a utopia, such as Arthur's position as an outsider, his attempt to create an ideal society, and White's concern with the problems of his own time as much as with those of the Middle Ages. White's assertion that "the central theme of the *Morte d'Arthur* is to find an antidote for War" indicates that his reading of Malory stressed the idealism in *Le Morte Darthur* and this infects his own book. Unlike William Morris or Sir Thomas More, White does not present an ideal society already achieved, but the struggle towards it. The search for the antidote to war, the cure for Night, is the first essential for the creation of Arthur's utopia.

The world of *The Once and Future King*, unlike the utopias discussed above, is not entirely new to the reader. White does not describe every detail of life and society in Arthur's England as Butler describes Erewhon. There are two reasons for this. First, White is more concerned to present Arthur's personal struggle to improve society than to present a complete account of that society. His life, from the time he becomes king, is a process of initiating change and responding to its effects. Utopian fiction, in contrast, characteristically presents a society at a single moment in its development. The history of the society may be told, as in *News From Nowhere*, but it is told in order to explain how English society came to that condition from the one that Guest

knew. No character experiences change and revolution during the course of the book. Secondly, when background material is required, White directs the reader to medieval life and society in general. For example, the description of the Castle of the Forest Sauvage (pp. 36-38) concentrates on the detail of this particular castle rather than castles in general, and the use of architectural terms such as "barbican," "bartizan," and "shell-keep" (p. 37), implies that the reader is expected to have rather more than a basic knowledge of medieval castles. Similarly the wealth of detail given in the two chapters describing the condition of England ("The Ill-Made Knight" Chapter XXV and "The Candle in the Wind" Chapter III) indicates that we are not in a totally unfamiliar world. Arthur's England does not need to be explained to the reader from the foundations up, because it is based on the medieval world that we know from history.

The changes that Arthur makes in his society are presented in all their theoretical and practical stages of development and reveal a concern with the way society is organised. Arthur's first action is to destroy the feudal convention of war. The Battle of Bedegraine episode in which he crushes the challenge to his kingship of the eleven kings led by Lot of Orkney is modelled on Malory's account of the battle (I 12-19; Spisak, pp. 44-54). White refers to but does not present directly the first rebellion against Arthur (I 8-9; Spisak, pp. 39-41) or the mission to ask for help from King Ban and King Bors (I 10; Spisak, pp. 41-43). Instead of these

events, the prelude to the war in The Once and Future King is a discussion of the theories and morals of warfare, which is White's original contribution. White's presentation changes the balance of the story. The omission of the First Gaelic War, together with the detailed presentation of planning for the Battle of Bedegraine and its position near the end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" increase the significance of the battle. White uses a story from Malory to explore the problem of warfare and this dramatization of theoretical problems is characteristic of utopian fiction.

The problem of war is explored through Arthur's experience of and response to the problems of government. The importance of Arthur's character to the unity of The Once and Future King was discussed in Chapter Three. The development of the theme of good government plays an important part in Arthur's personal story and as such gains considerable prominence. As a young king Arthur faces the Gaelic rebellions with a great deal to learn. For example, he comments: "I must say it is nice to be a king. It was a splendid battle" and "Look at the way Lot of Orkney ran, after I had begun to use Excalibur" (p. 225). Arthur's enthusiastic attitude to his new rôle is not shared by Merlyn: "The old man crammed his beard in his mouth and began to chew it, as he generally did when he was put about" (p. 225). White has set a problem here. The reader is sympathetic to Arthur; he has been characterized in the first book as a naturally amiable boy. On the other hand, throughout "The Sword in the Stone"

Merlyn has been the voice of authority, both for his pupils and the reader. His disapproval, therefore, is a signal that Arthur's attitude is unsatisfactory. Merlyn is successful subsequently in modifying Arthur's attitude, by subtly playing on the King's modesty:

"It was clever of you," he said slowly, "to win the battle."

Arthur had been taught that he ought to be modest, and he was too simple to notice that the vulture was going to pounce.

"Oh, well. It was luck."

"Very clever," repeated Merlyn. "How many of your kerns were killed?"

"I don't remember."

"No."

"Kay said --"

The king stopped in the middle of the sentence, and looked at him.

"Well," he said. "It was not fun, then. I had not thought." (p. 227)

Merlyn guides his pupil to question the established order as a preliminary to his attempt to change it. He makes Arthur realize how broad social structures and assumptions, such as the way in which wars are fought, can affect unidentified individuals. Arthur considers this problem throughout "The Queen of Air and Darkness" and each stage of his reasoning is presented in dialogue with Merlyn and Kay. A presentation of the basis and function of social institutions is characteristic of utopian fiction. Where The Once and Future King differs from most utopias is that Arthur is more powerful than most protagonists and questions his society with a view to changing it.

The discussions preceding Bedegraine relate directly to

medieval methods of warfare and attitudes to it. White develops links with the situation of his own time through Merlyn's living backwards. He introduces the question of pacifism:

"When I was a young man," he said, "there was a general idea that it was wrong to fight in wars of any sort. Quite a lot of people in those days declared that they would never fight for anything whatever." (p. 237)

References to Merlyn's youth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the means of relating Arthur's problem to the situation facing White when he wrote his Arthurian books. In this case Merlyn is recalling the pacifist ideas of the 1920s and 1930s, and White's own position in Ireland during the Second World War. Linking the central character's problem to the situation during White's own lifetime is another characteristic feature of utopian fiction.

Merlyn succeeds in convincing Arthur that wars are evil, but he nevertheless assists him in winning the wars against Lot so that Arthur can use his authority to establish peace. Under Merlyn's guidance Arthur develops his idea to persuade all the knights to join an order which will fight only for good: "It will be using the Might instead of fighting against it, and turning a bad thing into a good" (p. 255). This conclusion is central to the first stage of Arthur's attempt to rule peacefully; later discussions refine the idea into detailed plans for the Round Table.

The Round Table, the physical symbol of Arthur's first philosophy, clearly derives from Malory. However, White invested the Round Table with an additional meaning, by making it a part of Arthur's attempt to control force. Utopian fiction, such as News From Nowhere, shows a theory in action, but in The Once and Future King the development of the theory itself is shown, through a number of stages. This is particularly important because the Round Table is such a familiar idea, and it gains in power as a result of being the product of Arthur's thought process. Arthur describes his idea for an order of knighthood:

I will try to get them into our Order. We shall have to make it a great honour, you see, and make it fashionable and all that. Everybody must want to be in. And then I shall make the oath that of the order that Might is only to be used for Right.
(p. 254)

The Round Table as an institution is the first stage of Arthur's attempt to improve the lot of humanity by redirecting violence to serve a good end. It is important to recognize that the idea precedes the object. The idea of a round table as the focus of the order is introduced almost casually and the practical difficulties of the idea are emphasized:

"There will be a lot of jealousy," said Kay. "You will have all the knights in this order of yours saying that they are the best one, and wanting to sit at the top of the table."

"Then we must have a round table, with no top."

"But, Arthur, you could never sit a hundred and fifty knights at a round table. Let me see...."

Merlyn, who hardly ever interfered in the arguments now, but sat with his hands folded on his stomach and beamed, helped Kay out of the difficulty.

"It would need to be about fifty yards across," he said. "You do it by $2\pi r$." (p. 272)

White's Arthur develops the idea of the Round Table from first principles and considers even the most mundane practicalities of his idea. It is characteristic of White's approach to Le Morte D'Arthur that he does not simply use material because it is part of the story, but explores it from different angles and invests it with humour and new meanings. In The Once and Future King the Round Table is more than the traditional institution of Arthur's knights. The slow process of its birth emphasizes Arthur's intention to make it a powerful force for good in his kingdom. It is the beginning of his attempt to create a utopia.

The next stage in Arthur's attempt to bring peace to his kingdom is a response to what he sees as the failure of the Round Table. He explains the problem to Lancelot and Guenever:

We have achieved what we were fighting for, and now we still have the fighters on our hands. Don't you see what has happened? We have run out things to fight for, so all the fighters of the Table are going to rot. Look at Gawaine and his brothers. While there were still giants and dragons and wicked knights of the old brigade, we could keep them occupied: we could keep them in order. But now that the ends have been achieved, there is nothing for them to use their might on. So they use it on Pellinore and Lamorak and my sister -- God be good to them. (p. 455)

Arthur recognizes that the Round Table could only succeed so long as there was a legitimate outlet for the violence. Its success was the cause of its downfall. The Once and Future King is unlike most utopian fiction in that the figure of

authority, Arthur, realizes that his solutions to the problems of humanity may create further problems. He is willing to question his methods in order to further his attempt to find the antidote to war. Realising that he has "tried to establish Right by Might, and you can't do that" (p. 455), Arthur feels that he "ought to have rooted Might out altogether, instead of trying to adapt it" (p. 456). The idea of the Quest for the Holy Grail develops from these ideas, but Arthur fails to understand the true nature of the Quest. He still sees physical prowess as a factor for success: "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, and it would be worth doing?" (p. 457). The experiences of the knights on the Grail Quest show how wrong was Arthur's understanding of the project. Those knights who, like Gawaine, treated the Quest for the Holy Grail exactly like any other quest and went searching for adventure and battle had no success at all. Only the ones who rejected unnecessary violence achieved the Quest. Arthur's personal search for an improvement in society which will affect everyone is not advanced at all by the Quest for the Holy Grail, and the power of Might is not lessened in any way.

The Holy Grail episode does not fit in with the pattern of Arthur's thoughts up to this point. Before the beginning of the Quest he has acknowledged that to use Might for Right solves nothing; nevertheless he tries to use Might for spiritual regeneration and fails. It is revealing to compare

Malory's account of the initiation of the Grail Quest with White's. In Le Morte Darthur the Quest is precipitated by a series of events, beginning with the knighting of Galahad and culminating in the appearance of the Grail to the assembled knights (XIII 1-7: Spisak, pp. 427-33). The decision to pursue the Quest comes from the knights themselves, not from Arthur, who is distressed because he fears that the Round Table will suffer as a result. This is in contrast to White's presentation. In The Once and Future King the idea is originally Arthur's but is taken up with enthusiasm by Lancelot. Arthur does have some doubts about the Quest: "perhaps it was aiming too high. If people reach perfection they vanish, you know. It may mean the end of the Table" (p. 458). He nevertheless allows the Quest to begin.

There is an important difference in tone between the two versions. In Malory Arthur's knights are obeying a summons from God which Arthur recognized could destroy his beloved Table. In The Once and Future King, however, the Quest is conceived as a stage in Arthur's social engineering, and there is characteristically no supernatural element in the initiation of the Quest. The Quest for the Holy Grail is an important part of Lancelot's story, but as a stage in Arthur's experiments in dealing with Might it is not as important as the Round Table or the idea of Justice. To some extent the Quest for the Holy Grail is an interruption to the growth of Arthur's ideas about government. In proposing that his knights search for the Holy Grail, Arthur does not show that

he has learned from his previous failure, nor does it anticipate the next stage of development.

The third and final stage of the development of Arthur's utopian ideal is the attempt to abolish Might altogether:

He had decided not to truckle with Might any more -- to cut it out root and branch, by establishing another standard altogether. He was groping towards Right as a criterion of its own -- towards Justice as an abstract thing which did not lean upon power.
(p. 508)

His preoccupation for the latter part of The Once and Future King is to develop the law so that there can be no need for recourse to violence to settle disputes. As the Round Table was the symbol of the first stage of Arthur's attempt to deal with force, so the Justice Room is the symbol of the final phase. In contrast to the Round Table, which as an institution thrives on fellowship and commitment to a shared ideal, the Justice Room is completely square and stands for the rigidity and impersonality of the law. The description of the room emphasizes these qualities:

The windows were covered, and the doors were never uncovered. The result was that you felt that you were in a box: you had the strange feeling of symmetrical enclosure which must be known by butterflies in killing-bottles.
(p. 583)

Arthur is eventually trapped by his own law, first into condemning his wife to death, and then into continuing the war against Lancelot because Gawaine demanded it according to his legal right. Arthur is so committed to the idea of Justice that he refuses to act as an absolute monarch who can override

the law. He therefore submits himself to its demands, and is prepared to sacrifice his personal happiness to secure peace but even then does not succeed. Arthur's commitment to the idea of justice is tested and demonstrated by his having to subject Guenever to the process of the law three times: first in the quarrel with Sir Mador de la Porte about the death of Sir Patrick, then in the accusation of treason by Sir Meliagrance, and finally when Lancelot and Guenever are taken together by Mordred. These episodes reveal Arthur's willingness to prefer Justice to his personal happiness.

The concept of Justice is Arthur's final attempt to change his society and it too fails. He is successful in abiding by his own laws and in administering them properly, but the law cannot deal with Mordred's hostility. In his meditation before the final battle Arthur recognizes both the depth of his own commitment to his idea of Justice and the limitations of that idea:

At last he had sought to make a map of force, as it were, to bind it down by laws. He had tried to codify the evil uses of might by individuals, so that he might set bounds to them by the impersonal justice of the state. He had been prepared to sacrifice his wife and his best friend to the impersonality of Justice. And then, even as the might of the individual seemed to have been curbed, the Principle of Might had sprung up behind him in another shape -- in the shape of collective might, of banded ferocity, of numerous armies unsusceptible to individual laws. He had bound the might of units, only to find that it was assumed by pluralities. He had conquered murder to be faced with war. There were no Laws for that. (p. 666-7)

The simple structure and emphatic position of the final

sentence reflect Arthur's frustration and weariness at the failure of his last attempt to create peace.

Although Arthur does not succeed in his search, his consideration of the problem of Might in society and his schemes for its control are part of an attempt to build a utopia in his kingdom. Characteristically utopias are concerned with various aspects of social organization, but White, as was discussed in Chapter Four, does not create a detailed social setting for most of The Once and Future King. Nevertheless, Might is presented as the fundamental force which creates such problems in the way that men behave towards each other. It is, therefore, an important factor in the organization of society. The essential freedom which Arthur secures for his people, is freedom from oppression by the strong and wicked. He achieves, for a short time, a partial utopia. The presentation of Arthur's willingness to think seriously about the way he should govern his kingdom is characteristic of utopian fiction. He is the mouthpiece of White's ideas about his reading of Malory, the search for an "antidote for War," a reading which is closely combined with his reactions to the Second World War. In a similar way Morris advocates a kind of socialism in News From Nowhere, and Butler attacks convention in Erewhon. The fictions describe or dramatize their authors' concerns about their own societies.

The Once and Future King shares other features with utopias in addition to a basic concern about ways of governing. In the earlier discussion of utopias it was noted that the narrator is often an outsider, alien to that society, or that an outsider is introduced into the plot to emphasize the difference between the society of the book and that of its author. The first-person narrators of both Erewhon and News From Nowhere are Victorian Englishmen who carry with them the expectations and prejudices of their era and nationality. In Brave New World the alien is Savage, whose introduction to London society causes some of the other characters to confront attitudes and ways of behaviour which they have previously taken for granted. The reader is given the opportunity to contrast two possible ways of life. Arthur's status in The Once and Future King is in some ways similar. To an extent a king is always an outsider; by virtue of his rank. Arthur, however, is a stranger in a deeper, and to some degree a contradictory sense. He was not brought up by Sir Ector to be a king, nor even a knight, and although he is the recipient of Merlyn's "extra tuition" he has no idea why this is so. Furthermore, not only is Arthur brought up outside a royal family, but outside a normal family structure as well. The Wart is aware that he is different from other children, but he believes himself to be different in an inferior rather than a superior way:

The Wart was not a proper son. He did not understand this, but it made him feel unhappy, because Kay seemed to regard it as making him inferior in some way. Also it was different not having a father and mother, and Kay had taught him that being different was wrong. (p. 8)

Arthur is different, and more important, he is aware of being different even as a child. Arthur's position as an outsider has implications for his position and attitude as king. Because he was not brought up at court and never knew his father he does not automatically follow his father's example. He does not need to rule as tradition dictates and is free to find his own way.

Arthur has the same kind of objectivity about kingship as the narrator of Erewhon, for example, has about the customs and conventions to which he is exposed. The difference lies in the utopian explorer's ability only to question whereas Arthur has the power to change his kingdom. Merlyn encourages Arthur to change the system and not to copy his father. He asks: "Have you ever thought seriously about the state of your country, for instance, or are you going to go on all your life being like Uther Pendragon? After all you are the King of the place" (p. 228). "The Queen of Air and Darkness" shows not only the development of the idea of the Round Table, but, as shown in Chapters Three and Five, it also shows Arthur's growth to maturity as a king.

Arthur's childhood as described in "The Sword in the Stone" has strong links with utopian literature. Utopian literature is concerned with the description of the ideal state, and in this sense "The Sword in the Stone" is the most utopian book in The Once and Future King. It does not

describe an alien social system, but rather the perfect working of an historical one. It also has other features of utopias. The social setting of "The Sword in the Stone" was discussed in Chapter Four, but some aspects of its presentation are also relevant to the present discussion. The Castle of the Forest Sauvage is the centre of a feudal manor whose overlord is Sir Ector. White contrasts the Wart's home with the conventional image of a feudal manor, with its starving peasants and wicked landlord:

In other parts of Gramarye, of course, there did exist wicked and despotic masters -- feudal gangsters whom it was to be King Arthur's destiny to chasten -- but the evil was in the bad people who abused it, not in the feudal system. (p. 131)

The feudal system is shown functioning in the account of hay-making, which was discussed in detail in Chapter Four. It is a well-organized co-operative event:

Sir Ector stood on the top of a rick, whence he could see what everybody was doing, and shouted commands all over the two-hundred-acre field, and grew purple in the face. The best mowers mowed away in a line where the grass was still uncut, their scythes roaring in the strong sunlight. The women raked the dry hay together in long strips with wooden rakes, and the two boys with pitchforks followed up on either side of the strip, turning the hay inwards so that it lay well for picking up. (p. 6)

Everyone is involved in the operation, the lord of the manor, his son and foster-son, and the men and women of the village. People like the "best mowers" use their skills for the benefit of the whole community, but even those who are less skilled have a part to play. White invests hay-making with a moral

value:

The Wart loved hay-making, and was good at it. Kay, who was two years older, generally stood on the edge of the bundle which he was trying to pick up, with the result that he worked twice as hard as the Wart for only half the result. But he hated to be beaten at anything, and used to fight away with the wretched hay -- which he loathed like poison -- until he was quite sick. (p. 7)

Kay is a poor workman, stubborn, short-tempered, and out of sympathy with his environment. The Wart's skill is described in simple, almost dismissive language. However, the detailed account of Kay's inability throws the Wart's skill into relief. Kay's approach to hay-making shows how many things can go wrong, but his main fault is that he dislikes the work. Hay-making is a communal effort and a celebration of the successful completion of the farming year. Kay's failure suggests that, unlike the Wart, he is not in sympathy with the community. In News From Nowhere hay-making is invested with a similar moral value. It is the goal of Dick and Clara's journey up the Thames, and has the same atmosphere of a working festival.

The society in which the Wart grows up is an ideal version of the feudal system. The positive qualities of the feudal system as exemplified in the Forest Sauvage are emphasized when White acknowledges the dangers of the times:

This part of the story is one which deals with troubled times. Whenever there was a raid or an invasion by some neighbouring tyrant, everybody on the estate hurried into the castle, driving the beasts before them into the courts, and there they remained until the danger was over. (p. 36)

The castle provides both physical protection and social stability. The utopian quality of the Wart's childhood does not extend to the whole country, in fact it is confined to the Castle of the Forest Sauvage. Arthur's attempts at creating a peaceful society are to some extent directed towards recreating the world of his childhood, which was denied to most of his people.

The isolation of the Wart's home also recalls various utopias. The Castle of the Forest Sauvage is physically remote; it "stood in an enormous clearing in a still more enormous forest" (pp. 5-6). The forest is dangerous as well as vast:

It was not only that there were wild boars in it, whose sounders would at this season be furiously rooting about, nor that one of the surviving wolves might be slinking about behind any tree, with pale eyes and slavering chops. The mad and wicked animals were not the only inhabitants of the crowded gloom. When men themselves became wicked they took refuge there, outlaws cunning and bloody as the gore-crow, and as persecuted. (p. 12)

Both natural and human wickedness thrive in the forest. The idyllic qualities of the Castle of the Forest Sauvage are given a greater emphasis in contrast to the evil which is immediately outside the gates. The forest is a natural barrier between the Castle and the rest of the world, both because of its physical impenetrability and the dangers that lurk within. When Sir Ector is considering the boys' education, for example, he decides against sending them away

to school: "Isn't so much the distance," said Sir Ector, "but that giant What's-'is-name is in the way. Have to pass through his country, you understand" (p. 4). The isolation of the Castle has a clear effect on its inhabitants in that they are prevented from travelling by the dangers of the forest. Such isolation is similar to that of Erewhon or Utopia, which are remote and cut off by natural barriers.

The Wart is brought up in a small, isolated community which illustrates the perfect working of the feudal system. I have argued that Arthur develops his philosophy of Right instead of Might by stages throughout his kingship, working towards utopia. Part of the reason, however, that he is able to conceive of utopia is because he experienced it on a small scale as a child. The other reason for his ability to struggle towards Right is his education at the hands of Merlyn. The magician's influence, the Wart's social and physical environment, and his inherited position make Arthur the ideal king. Arthur himself traces his characteristics as ^aking to his childhood. For example, he says of the First Gaelic War: "I didn't know it was going to start, until it had. I suppose that was due to my having been brought up in the country" (p. 238-9). White wrote of "The Sword in the Stone" that "it is more or less a kind of wish-fulfillment of the kind of things that I should like to have happened to me when I was a boy."^e

^e White, in a letter to L.J. Potts dated 14th January 1938, in Letters to a Friend, p. 87.

In addition to the idealization of the setting and community, "The Sword in the Stone" also idealizes childhood. Kurth Sprague has shown that the Wart's childhood contains no women in serious rôles; the only women in the book are either comic, like the Governess or the Nurse (who have no names, and therefore no identity beyond their rôles), or outside society, like Maid Marian. The Wart does not encounter any women of his own social class,⁹ not even Sir Ector's wife, for whom the young Arthur in Le Morte Darthur expresses great affection. Sprague argues that the absence of women, particularly of a mother, reflects White's own idea of a perfect childhood. By creating an ideal childhood without women, White denies the Wart a part of common experience. This has important implications for Arthur's later experience because White suggests that one of the reasons why Arthur fell in love with Morgause may have been "because he had never known a mother of his own, so that the rôle of mother love, as she stood with her children behind her, took him between wind and water" (p. 322). Therefore, one of the elements that made the Wart's childhood apparently ideal, sowed the seeds of the later tragedy.

A common feature of utopian fiction is the description of a whole social and political system. Clearly this does not happen in The Once and Future King; it is implied that the system in operation is the feudal system. This is stated explicitly only in "The Sword in the Stone," but there is no

⁹ Sprague, pp. 155-85.

evidence that the feudal system is not the basis of government throughout The Once and Future King as a whole. In fact, as was shown in Chapter Four, the social background to The Once and Future King is hardly described at all. Arthur is frequently described as striving for the good of his people, but the people themselves form only a very small part of the book. The peasants appear in "The Sword in the Stone" in the descriptions of hay-making and the Christmas feast, but Hob is the only one who has any individuality. The fate of the common people becomes important again when Merlyn persuades Arthur to consider the fate of the kerns in battle. In this context, however, the people are seen as racial groups, as Gaels, Saxons, or Galls. Merlyn and Arthur do not consider the cultural, linguistic, or religious identities of the various groups, but only the abstract idea of race and of racially motivated nationalism. Merlyn explains the futility of such nationalism:

"Uther," he said at length, "your lamented father, was an aggressor. So were his predecessors the Saxons, who drove the Old Ones away. But if we go on living backward like that, we shall never come to the end of it. The Old Ones themselves were aggressors, against the earlier race of the copper hatchets, and even the hatchet fellows were aggressors against some earlier crew of esquimaux^{Urs} who lived on shells. You simply go on and on, until you get to Cain and Abel. (p. 235)

White, like many writers of utopias, is concerned about the problems of his own time. In this case the oppression of various races by the Normans echoes the treatment of the Jews by the Nazis, and the rôle of the British in Ireland. It is important to stress, however, that the racial situation in The

Once and Future King does not parallel either of these. It is, rather, informed by White's general awareness of racial oppression and antagonism in the 1930s and 1940s.

There are glimpses of the lives of the peasants in Chapter XXV of "The Ill-Made Knight" and Chapter III of "The Candle in the Wind," discussed in detail in Chapter Four. They are, however, only glimpses. For example, there was:

Joly Joly Wat, with his tar-box beside him. He was the most typical figure of Gramarye, his tar being the antiseptic of his sheep. If you had said to him, "Don't spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar," he would have agreed with you at once -- for it was he who invented the adage, which we have translated from sheep into ships. (p. 567-8)

It is typical of White to use the description of this figure to impart information to his reader. In this case we learn both that medieval shepherds used tar as an antiseptic, and that this was the origin of the common saying. We learn very little more, however, about this section of the society of Arthur's kingdom.

The only section of society shown in The Once and Future King is the aristocracy, but even they seem to take little part in government. There is no evidence of a machinery of government: Arthur has no chancellor, no treasury or taxation, and parliament is mentioned only once, when the Dictator of Rome demands tribute "the King, after consulting his parliament, had returned a message that no tribute was due" (p. 351). This section of The Once and Future King is based

closely on Malory (V 1-3: Spisak, pp. 121-124)), and the word parliament itself is used in Le Morte Darthur (V 3: Spisak, p. 124 l. 8). Apart from this single incident, Arthur's government appears to be personal. He works out his ideas about how people should live according to the principles he learned from Merlyn in "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness," and puts them into practice with the aid of his knights. None of the knights is involved in the theorizing, except for Kay in the earliest discussions in "The Queen of Air and Darkness." Lancelot, although he fully supports Arthur's ideas and is a vital instrument in their execution, is not shown as contributing to the theories. This pattern continues when Arthur begins to reform the law; he appears to do all the work himself:

When Arthur had said that he was going to arrange some of his famous justice, he did not mean that he was actually going to sit. Kings did sit personally in the Middle Ages, even as late as the so-called Henry IV, who was supposed to have sat both in the Exchequer and the King's Bench. But tonight it was too late for law-giving. Arthur was off to read the pleas for the morrow, a practice which he followed like a conscientious man. . . . Even now, since the King had begun to encourage Justice so as to bind the power of Fort Mayne once for all, there were three kinds of law to be wrestled with. He was trying to boil them down, from Customary, Canon and Roman law, into a single code which he hoped to call the Civil one. This occupation, as well as reading the morrow's pleas, was what used to call him off to labour every evening, to solitude and silence in the Justice Room. (p. 583)

In the final chapter of The Once and Future King Arthur is still working personally on the law, on "dreary papers of government, still bravely persevered in -- of law, still to be codified -- of commissariat and of armament and of orders for

the day" (p. 665). The character of Arthur reflects the way the state is run, and performs the same function as the political systems described in Erewhon or News From Nowhere. Arthur is the ideal government; the institution which provides both the day-to-day running of the state and the ideas on which the state is based.

There is, therefore, throughout The Once and Future King, an implicit acceptance of what appears to be a benevolent dictatorship. For White, writing between 1937 and 1942, the special significance of "dictator" is clear. In telling the story of the Roman War, the narrator comments: "it is strange to reflect that Dictator is the very word which Malory uses" (p. 351). In the discussion of Might in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" Merlyn reveals the evils of dictatorship by describing Hitler's methods:

There was just such a man when I was young -- an Austrian who invented a new way of life and convinced himself that he was the chap to make it work. He tried to impose his reformation by the sword, and plunged the civilised world into misery and chaos. (p. 274)

Merlyn argues that "the business of the philosopher was to make ^o ideas available, and not to impose them on people" (p. 274). White does not, however, allow Merlyn to reply to Kay's reasonable response that "Arthur is fighting the present war . . . to impose his ideas on King Lot" (p. 274). This exchange suggests that White recognized the contradictions of the situation, and that Arthur, as sole ruler, is in a position to behave as a dictator. However, in considering how

to control Might, Arthur is concerned with persuading people to accept his ideas: ideas which he believes will improve the lives of all peaceful citizens. Therefore, although Arthur exercises sole power over his people, he does so with a desire to free them from oppression. He does not use his power simply to maintain his own position, and at one point, earlyⁱⁿ his reign, considers the possibility of relinquishing it (p. 235). That is not the action of a dictator.

In the last resort many of Arthur's people choose the ideas of Mordred's party. The rôle of Mordred as the only popularly chosen leader in The Once and Future King has been examined in Chapter Four. The ideas on which the party is founded echo the fascism of the 1920s and 1930s:

Their aims were some kind of nationalism, with Gaelic autonomy, and a massacre of the Jews as well, in revenge for a mythical saint called Hugh of Lincoln. There were already thousands, spread all over the country, who carried his badge of a scarlet fist clenching a whip, and who called themselves Thrashers. (p. 628)

Both The Once and Future King and The Aerodrome discuss the attraction of fascism. In the latter the efficient but inhuman values of the Air Force are contrasted with the traditional but muddled moral values of the Village. Roy, the central character, must make a choice between the two. There are some similarities between Roy and Arthur. Roy's knowledge of his parentage is, like Arthur's imperfect, and at one stage Roy believes his relationship with a Village girl to be incestuous. Like Arthur, Roy is an outsider: he belongs to

neither system and can question both. He is involved with the planning process for the Air Force's take-over of the country, but finally rejects it. In The Aerodrome the alternative systems are presented through the plot, as in Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four, and Roy's response to them provides the basis for comparison. In The Once and Future King Arthur considers alternative ways of dealing with the problem of Might in society and he must choose between them. Arthur chooses to try to create a peaceful society for all its members, and therefore rejects the divisive ideas of fascism long before Mordred presents a definite challenge in that form.

The greatest difference between Arthur's England and Utopia, or the England of News From Nowhere is that the latter two are left intact at the end of the book, whereas Arthur's England is destroyed. His personal government is not capable of preventing Might from reasserting itself and destroying all his work. In Utopia and News From Nowhere the systems of government lack those institutions which, it is implied, cause people to behave wickedly. The institutions are removed and, therefore, people behave well. In News From Nowhere the possibility of criminal behaviour is acknowledged, but its treatment is quite different from that which existed in Victorian England and as a result people are not driven to a life of continued criminality. Both Utopia and News From Nowhere are essentially optimistic about human nature once it is freed from oppression.

Arthur tries to free his people from oppression by the strong, and succeeds for a time. It appears, however, that although people no longer live in fear and can fulfil their potential in the "Age of Individuals," such peace and prosperity has a limited life span. In The Once and Future King part of society, led by Mordred, has an urge to destroy the peace that Arthur has created. In the final chapter of The Once and Future King Arthur considers why his attempt ended in failure, and concludes that the next stage of the battle against Might must be the abolition of frontiers. It is difficult to see, however, how the absence of frontiers could have prevented Mordred's desire to fight against his father. Arthur's experiences are more important to the problem of utopia than his conclusions at the end of the book. Throughout his life Arthur is shown attempting to control or channel people's desire to fight each other. The reason why Arthur fails to create a utopia is because, although he changes the institutions under which people live, he does not change human nature. Arthur began his efforts to improve society from an optimistic position: "He had been taught by Merlyn to believe that man was perfectible: that he was on the whole more decent than beastly: that good was worth trying: that there was no such thing as original sin" (p. 666). Arthur's failure does not seem to bear out such optimism. Something in man, whether original sin or not, prevents his success. Utopian fiction such as News From Nowhere assumes that people will change along with the institutions, and in this respect is internally consistent. Arthur's England is,

however, inhabited by people who do not change, and his efforts are, therefore, doomed to fail. In thinking beyond his failure, by deciding that the next stage in the defeat of Might must be the abolition of frontiers, Arthur is reaffirming the optimistic view. The idea that original sin inevitably condemns people to suffer is not allowed to triumph even in the face of Arthur's defeat.

The Once and Future King is clearly not a utopian fiction. Nevertheless, it reveals a number of features common to utopias, perhaps the most important of which is the basic theme of the search for good government. This theme is much more limited than the concern with social organisation in general shown by many utopias. For White, however, the rôle of force in society, and in international relations, was the fundamental problem in the way that people and nations treat each other. It was a subject he treated again in Mistress Masham's Repose when the Professor warns Maria against the temptation to tyrannize over the Lilliputians simply because she is bigger than they are:

Suppose you managed to tame her, suppose you even managed to tame all the other people from the Island of Repose. No doubt there are several more. You would be a Big Bug then, however kind you were, and they would be little bugs, without the capitals. They would come to depend on you; you would come to boss it over them. They would get servile, and you would get lordly. Do you think that this would be good for either of you? I think that it would only make them feeble, and make you a bully.¹⁰

¹⁰ White, Mistress Masham's Repose, p. 29.

Arthur's systematic search for an "antidote for War" is concerned with the basic problem of how people behave towards each other. His education among the animals taught him to respect different ways of life as being of equal importance. As king, he tries to create a society in which individuals enjoy mutual respect and can live in peace. Although he fails to create such a society, his ideal is a constant element in the books and linking them with the broad tradition of utopian fiction.

Chapter Ten

Comic and Tragic Modes in White's Arthurian Books

The distinction between mode and genre was discussed in Chapter Two: mode is derived from genre, but is distinguished from it by the lack of a complete external form.¹ Comedy and tragedy as genres are kinds of drama, but comic and tragic modes are found in other kinds of literature. The Once and Future King, in addition to revealing elements of various subgenres, also shows significant modal variations. The purpose of the present chapter is to explore the two dominant modes in The Once and Future King, the comic and the tragic, and to consider to what extent the two modes are combined. Following a brief discussion of the features of the comic and tragic modes, I shall examine the appearance of each in The Once and Future King. In such a mixture of contrasting rather than harmonizing modes, there is a possibility that one may dominate the other and render it ineffective or absurd. In The Once and Future King, however, the two modes strengthen each other so that White's telling of the story of Arthur has a resonance that could not exist in a purely comic or tragic version.

¹ Fowler, p. 107-8.

Mode is the most versatile of generic categories: it can reveal any number of generic features within a work short of overall structure. The more elements of a particular genre that are revealed the greater will be the importance of that mode to the generic identity of the work. The features that indicate mode are the same as those indicating genre but are subordinated to the external form of another genre. A work showing only a few features of a genre will have only a limited or localized modal variation. The features of comic and tragic modes are, therefore, the same as those which appear in the dramatic genres, but they function in kinds of literature other than drama. An examination of the possible features of comic and tragic modes must therefore begin with the dramatic genres.

It is necessary to distinguish between the two meanings of the term comedy: as a form in which the confusions of the plot are resolved satisfactorily so that the chief characters can look forward to a happy future; and as a humorous form. The two meanings often overlap, and a work which is a comedy in the former sense can also be humorous. According to Frye the characteristic theme of comedy in the former sense is "the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it."² In his Third Essay, Frye describes the typical plot of comedy and shows that it concerns youth thwarted by age but ultimately

² Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 43.

prevailing and creating a new order.³ Frye draws his examples from dramatic comedy but remarks that fictional comedy is mainly descended from the dramatic form.⁴ The characteristic theme and plot that Frye outlines are not necessarily dramatic; there are numerous examples of typical comic theme and plot in fiction. In Persuasion, for example, Lady Russell's and Sir Walter Elliott's objections to Anne's marriage are overcome and the enhancement of Anne's status as married woman is an example of social integration.⁵ The young triumph over the old and the main character achieves a rôle valued by society. Frye notes that the conclusion of a comedy is often marked "by some kind of party or festive ritual, which either appears at the end of the play or is assumed to take place immediately afterward. Weddings are most common."⁶ Such features are a part of the generic repertoire of dramatic comedy. They can, however, be subordinated to the form of prose narrative and work as indicators of comic mode.

In addition to the broad features of plot and theme there are other more localized characteristics that mark a work as comic, such as presentation of character and narrative tone. Both these features can move in and out of the comic mode within a single work. Frye has shown that many comic

³ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 163.

⁴ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 163.

⁵ Jane Austen, Persuasion ed. John Davie in Northanger Abbey and Persuasion (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁶ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 163.

character-types derive from classical drama,⁷ but a character may be comic as a result of presentation rather than because of a correspondence to a comic archetype. The comic elements of The Once and Future King make a strong impression on the reader, but are difficult to isolate. The plots of "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness" have an affinity with the typical comic plot outlined by Frye. There is also a variety of comic characters, such as Sir Ector, King Pellinore, and sometimes, Merlyn, but presentation rather than any archetypal quality makes these characters effective. There are some comic incidents, such as those concerning the fake Questing Beast. The narrative tone is also important in blending the disparate comic elements together. All these features will be considered in detail to reveal their importance to the effect of the book as a whole.

Tragedy has perhaps had more critical attention than any other literary genre. Discussions of the genre usually begin with Aristotle; an approach particularly appropriate to The Once and Future King as White's recorded view of Arthur's story is that: "the real reason why Arthur came to a bad end was that he had slept with his sister. It is a perfectly Aristotelian tragedy and it was the offspring of this union who killed him."⁸ Much of the critical attention paid to tragedy has been devoted to analyses of Aristotle's discussion in the Poetics, and the relationship of later

⁷ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 171-7.

⁸ White, letter to L.J. Potts dated 28 June 1939, in Gallix, ed. Letters to a Friend, p. 98.

tragedies to his description. Tragedy is unique in having a single critical text describing its earliest form that later criticism can take as a benchmark. It has been said that "though Aristotle's laws have been broken, their history is the history of Tragedy."⁹

The main feature of tragedy as described by Aristotle is that it should produce "pity and fear" by means of a plot in which a character, "who is neither distinguished for excellence and virtue, nor comes to grief on account of baseness and vice, but on account of some error."¹⁰ The action of the drama is more important than the presentation of character. This very brief summary clearly matches the outline of Arthur's story. However, later developments in the genre and commentators upon Aristotle added other features. There are two significant differences between classical tragedy and medieval tragedy as described by Chaucer's Monk:

The harm of hem that stoode in heigh degree,
And fillen so that ther nas no remedie
To brynge hem out of hir adversitee.
For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee,
Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde.
Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee;¹¹

⁹ F.L. Lucas, Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics (1927; rpt. London: Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 34.

¹⁰ L.J. Potts, trans. Aristotle on the Art of Fiction: An English Translation of Aristotle's Poetics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 33.

¹¹ F.N. Robinson ed., The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (1957; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 189.

Firstly, the distinguishing characteristic of the protagonist of classical tragedy is that he is neither completely good nor completely bad, not that he is of "high degree." This difference in emphasis is illustrated by the Monk's first example, Lucifer, who although he is of high rank, clearly does not share the moral status of an ordinary individual. This change in emphasis on the status of the hero had implications for the effect of tragedy on the audience in that "the exemplary element was overridden by the very stress on rank, which moved from its generic and involving quality to an isolated condition."¹² The second important difference between medieval and classical tragedy is that whereas for Aristotle the protagonist's downfall is caused by his own error, for Chaucer's Monk it is caused by Fortune.

Later developments in the genre have obscured Aristotle's description to some extent so that a modern discussion of tragedy is not confined to the genre as he described it. Frye, for example, considers the high status of the protagonist and the involvement of Fortune as characteristic features of tragedy:

The tragic hero is very great compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these, but whatever it is the tragic hero is our mediator with it.¹³

¹² Raymond Williams, Modern Tragedy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), p. 23.

¹³ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 207.

Interpretations of Aristotle have added layers to the criticism of tragedy. Perhaps the most significant is Castelvetro's development of the doctrine of the three unities.¹⁴ A further change in emphasis occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when tragedy, particularly the revenge tragedy, gained great popularity. Revenge as a motivating force existed in earlier tragedies, but is particularly associated with this period. Frye recognizes that the importance of revenge is not confined to the "revenge tragedies": "the revenge-tragedy is a simple tragic structure, and like most simple structures can be a very powerful one, often retained as a central theme even in the most complex tragedies."¹⁵ The theme of revenge is part of the generic repertoire of tragedy although it does not derive from Aristotle's description.

The features of tragedy discussed so far are all characteristic of tragic drama, although the dominant form during the Middle Ages was narrative rather than dramatic. However these features, when lacking a dramatic structure, are indicators of the tragic mode. In the nineteenth century the novel rather than drama was the dominant literary form and it became a vehicle for tragic stories. The typical tragic plot with the action stemming from an error by the protagonist can be seen as clearly in prose fiction as in drama. Michael

¹⁴ H.B. Charlton, Castelvetro's Theory of Poetry (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1913), pp. 83-94.

¹⁵ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 209.

Henchard's downfall, for example, stems from his selling his wife.¹⁶ Hardy emphasizes the importance of this action by isolating it at the beginning of the book. There is a tension, however, between the mainstream novel's tendency to take ordinary people as its characters and tragedy's traditional concern with great men. Hardy's treatment of common people as tragic figures is an example of the way in which genres can modify each other by contact. Although the features of tragic modes derive originally from drama, Hardy's novels contributed to the establishment of a genre of tragic novels.

In The Once and Future King as a whole there is a complex interaction between the comic and tragic modes. The tragic elements are implicit in the plot, and are therefore derived from Malory, whereas the comic elements are either in the presentation or in incidents that are White's own invention. The first half of the book contains less material from Malory and is generally more comic, while the second half, which depends much more on Le Morte Darthur, is more tragic. However, each book individually is dominated by either the comic or the tragic mode. The first two books are comic and in "The Ill-Made Knight" and "The Candle in the Wind" the tragic tone is stronger, and it is the more tragic in contrast to the earlier comedy. The task of the present chapter is to examine the way in which White uses and combines the comic and tragic effects of the book to achieve the particular quality

¹⁶ Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886: rpt, London: Macmillan, 1971).

of The Once and Future King. As there is a distinct change of tone halfway through the book it is possible to examine the comic elements first and then the tragic.

The Once and Future King, contains a variety of comic elements including some of the characterization, some of the invented incident, and some narrative comment. The comic mode dominates "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness," although it does not disguise the serious purpose of the books. Comedy is not confined entirely to the first two books, but the present discussion will concentrate on "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness."

Frye argues that the theme of the comic is the integration of the hero into society and that the characteristic plot of comedy concerns a love affair between hero and heroine which overcomes parental obstruction to signal the birth of a new order.¹⁷ Both "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness" exhibit the theme of integration in a limited way, although the characteristic love plot is absent. The basic plot of "The Sword in the Stone" concerns integration in that a young character, who is an outsider, eventually succeeds in being accepted and valued by society at large. "The Queen of Air and Darkness" continues the process of Arthur's acceptance by his subjects and begins a separate process of the integration of the Orkney

¹⁷ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 43 and 163.

brothers and King Pellinore. Comedy is conventionally concerned with the attempts to thwart the protagonist's intention, but this element is absent from both "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness." In the former the Wart has no ambition to be king, only to be a knight. He seems, however, to accept his lot and says to Sir Ector: "I am not sulking, . . . I don't mind a bit and I am very glad that Kay is going to be a knight. Please don't think I am sulking" (p. 185). The Orkney brothers do not even have this degree of frustration; they know that they will become knights eventually. Only King Pellinore's thwarted love affair appears to fit the conventional comic pattern, but here White overturns generic expectations to achieve comedy of a more immediate sort. Pellinore has not fallen in love with an unsuitable person whose family objects to the match, but with "a managing middle-aged, stout-hearted creature, who could cook, ride a straight line, and make beds -- but the hopes of all parties had been dashed by the arrival of a magic barge" (p. 256). The description of Piggy, although humorously anti-romantic, emphasizes those qualities necessary to a wife of King Pellinore. The marriage is prevented not by an antagonistic family but by supernatural circumstance. These unusual features increase the gap between Pellinore's love affair and the conventional romance of comedy.

As has been noted, Frye argues that the the comic plot typically culminates in:

some kind of party or festive ritual, which either appears at the end of the play or is assumed to take place immediately afterward. Weddings are most common, and sometimes so many of them occur, as in the quadruple wedding at the end of As You Like It, that they suggest also the wholesale pairing off that takes place in a dance.¹⁹

Both "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness" end with such a festival. At the end of the first book Arthur's rank is confirmed by the ritual of coronation, but the narrator expresses some doubt as to whether an account of it is necessary to the story: "Perhaps there ought to be a chapter about the coronation" (p. 211). The uncertainty echoes Frye's comment that the ritual can be assumed to take place after the end of the play. In place of the coronation, White shows the love of the people for Arthur through the various presents sent to the new king by his old friends, for example, "Cavall came simply, and gave him heart and soul. The Nurse of the Forest Sauvage sent a cough mixture, thirty dozen handkerchiefs all marked, and a pair of combinations with a double chest" (p. 211). The gifts reflect the concerns and status of Arthur's subjects, and some, like the Nurse's, seem inappropriate to Arthur's new rank. It is characteristic of White's comic technique to use incongruity without mockery. The end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" is marked by a double wedding: King Pellinore to the Queen of Flanders' Daughter and St. Toirdealbhach to Mother Morlan. The description of the festivities echoes the profusion of coronation gifts, for example, "there were monks and friars

¹⁹ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 163-4.

and abbots of every description, standing about in sandals among the knights, whose armour flashed by candlelight" (p. 320). The similarity in tone of the two events link them as festivals marking the end of the two books. The double wedding is not, however, the final event in "The Queen of Air and Darkness": it is followed by the seduction of Arthur. Thus the tone of celebration and hope that marks the end of "The Sword in the Stone" and is rekindled by the public celebration of the wedding in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" is undermined by the action that begins the tragic movement of the plot. The first two books have limited but important affinities with the comic plot as described by Frye: most of their comedy, however, is more localized.

Comedy of character is introduced early in "The Sword in the Stone" with Sir Ector and Sir Grummore. The effects of their anachronistic discussion of education and questing has been discussed in Chapter Six, but the presentation of Sir Ector's character has wider implications. Sir Ector's part in Le Morte Darthur is very small; he is described as "a lord of fair lyuelode in many partyes in Englund and Walys" (I 3-5: Spisak, p. 36). Malory defines the character by his status as a landowner because it is important that he should be a man of sufficient standing to bring up the future king nobly. White, however, develops the character of the man who will have an influence on the young Arthur. Sir Ector is, therefore, presented as the conventional affectionate father who pretends to be more severe than he really is, and often

has very little idea what the boys are doing. A typical example is his reaction when the Wart returns, with Merlyn, after recovering the lost Cully:

Sir Ector came bustling out with his greaves on back to front, and kissed the Wart on both cheeks. "Well, well, well," he exclaimed moistly. "Here we are again, hey? What the devil have we been doin', hey? Settin' the whole household upside down."

But inside himself he was proud of the Wart for staying out after a hawk, and prouder still to see that he had got it. (p. 33)

White uses the clichéd language partly for comic effect, but the humour has another purpose: it indicates that Sir Ector is the kind of character to retreat into clichés in an attempt not to betray emotion. The dropping of the final g places Sir Ector in the tradition of "huntin'" gentry, to which King Pellinore and Sir Grummore also belong.¹⁹ Sir Ector, however, is more than a typical character confined by the "huntin'" conventions. He provides a loving environment for the growing Wart.

Sir Ector's provincialism is also a source of humour, as revealed in his reaction to William Twyti's proposed visit:

He feared that his coverts would be disturbed by a lot of wild royal retainers -- never know what these city chaps will be up to next -- and that the King's huntsman, this fellow Twyti, would sneer at his humble hunting establishment, unsettle the hunt servants and perhaps even try to interfere with his kennel management. In fact, Sir Ector was shy. (p. 132)

¹⁹ See above Chapter Six, pp. 179-83.

His reluctance to have his kennels scrutinized by a professional places him on a human scale, as does his tendency^{to} work out his frustration, in a relatively harmless way, on the peasants. Sir Ector is startled in the midst of his meditations on the problem of Twyti by an old lady scaring rooks (p. 131). He recovers some of his good humour by returning the compliment:

At the hedge where the old lady lay waiting to scare rooks he was lucky enough to spot some approaching pigeons before she was aware of him or them, which gave him a chance to let out such a screech that he felt amply repaid for his own jump by seeing hers. It was going to be a good evening after all. "Good night to you," said Sir Ector affably, when the old lady recovered herself sufficiently to drop him a curtsey. (p. 134-5)

The presentation of such incidents creates a humorous characterization without placing too much emphasis on a minor figure.

Merlyn is more important and the comic elements in his character have a serious purpose, although it is not immediately apparent. When the Wart first discovers him, Merlyn is having difficulty in getting water from his well, and makes the first of many anachronistic comments: "why can't they get us the electric light and the company's water?" (p. 22). First impressions are correct: the anachronisms and a degree of difficulty with the practicalities of living are typical of Merlyn. Great magician though he is, he is often unable to find the right spell. For example, when Kay was learning tilting, Merlyn:

was practising a spell which he had forgotten. It was a spell to make the sergeant's moustaches uncurl, but at present it only uncurled one of them, and the sergeant had not noticed it. . . Once he made the sergeant's ears flap by mistake. (p. 55)

Such a petty activity is consistent with the traditionally malicious streak in supernatural people,²⁰ and in Merlyn this is combined with an antipathy to the athleticism that the sergeant represents. The magician is particularly likely to lose control of his powers if he is already flustered. For example, when the Wart does not understand why Kay cannot be given the same adventures as himself Merlyn loses his temper:

Merlyn took off his spectacles, dashed them on the floor and jumped on them with both feet.

"Castor and Pollux blow me to Bermuda!" he exclaimed, and immediately vanished with a frightful roar.

The Wart was still staring at his tutor's chair in some perplexity, a few moments later, when Merlyn reappeared. He had lost his hat and his hair and beard were tangled up, as if by a hurricane. He sat down again, straightening his gown with trembling fingers.

"Why did you do that?" asked the Wart.

"I did not do it on purpose."

"Do you mean to say that Castor and Pollux did blow you to Bermuda?"

"Let this be a lesson to you," replied Merlyn, "not to swear." (p. 86)

The episode is funny, but it is not overplayed. Merlyn does not deny his adventure, but, the eternal teacher, he manages to turn it into a lesson for the Wart. This and other similar incidents contribute to the impression of Merlyn as a powerful but disorganized magician. He lacks some of the mystery usually associated with supernatural characters and found, for example, in Malory's Merlin. White's Merlyn plays a much

²⁰ Cf. Titania and Oberon in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

larger part than Malory's and is therefore more familiar and less mysterious both to the reader and to other characters. His inefficiency is important to his later rôle in "The Queen of Air and Darkness." Merlyn forgets to tell Arthur that his mother was Igraine, and therefore Arthur is ignorant of his relationship to Morgause. This lapse by Merlyn is consistent with the character created in "The Sword in the Stone."

The presentation of Merlyn shows White's ability to combine the tragic and the comic. Merlyn is an amusing character, and the incidents associated with him are, on one level, simply for fun, but the tragedy can be traced to Merlyn's failure. It has been said that Merlyn was a self-portrait of White:

The Sword in the Stone had allowed him two wish fulfilments. He gave himself a dauntless, motherless boyhood; he also gave himself an ideal old age, free from care and the contradiction of circumstances, practising an enlightened system of education on a chosen pupil, embellished with an enchanter's hat, omniscient, unconstrainable and with a sink where the crockery washed itself up. As Merlyn, White had the time of his life: the brief dazzle of being head of the English Department at Stowe was a farthing candle to it.²¹

A sense of fun was one of the things that White injected into the ideal education demonstrated on the Wart, and it should not be undervalued. Merlyn, and the enjoyment in learning that he gives to the Wart, remain in Arthur's memory as an adult and symbolize the innocence and pleasure of childhood. The light-heartedness of the first book is a necessary prelude

²¹ Warner, p. 99.

to the sorrows and failures of Arthur's adult life. Part of his tragedy is the loss of innocence and magic, and eventually the loss of Merlyn himself.

In "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness" White invents a number of comic situations, in which he plays with various conventions. One of the most impressive is the Wart's meeting with King Pellinore. The Wart is lost at night in the dangerous Forest Sauvage. The boy's own fear is confirmed when he is shot at by a stripey arrow. It is against this background of hidden and unimaginable dangers that he meets King Pellinore. His first sight of the knight conforms to romantic expectations of enchanted forests:

Among the beeches there was the smallest movement and a silvery clink. Before the clink there were just the beeches, but immediately afterward there was a knight in full armour, standing still and silent and unearthly, among the majestic trunks. He was mounted on an enormous white horse that stood as rapt as its master, and he carried in his right hand, with its butt resting on the stirrup, a high, smooth jousting lance, which stood among the tree stumps, higher and higher, till it was outlined against the velvet sky. All was moonlit, all silver, too beautiful to describe. (p. 15)

The description is the most romantic piece of writing in The Once and Future King. It contains all the conventional symbols of knighthood: the full armour, the great white horse, and the lance pointing to heaven. The pace of the description is slow, dwelling on each feature of the knight in turn, and suggesting the boy's intense scrutiny.²² The description

²² Cf. the young Perceval's first sight of the knights in Chrétien de Troyes Arthurian Romances, trans. D.D.R. Owen (London: Dent, 1987), pp. 375-6.

reveals the Wart's idealized view of knighthood. The situation becomes comic when the boy tries to speak to the ideal knight: "the ghost jumped, so that it nearly fell off its horse, and it gave out a muffled baaa through its visor like a sheep" (p. 16). King Pellinore, a monarch who has mislaid his kingdom, does not conform in any respect to the ideal of a romantic knight. His confused conversation with the Wart undermines the description of the moonlit knight, and his preoccupation with the physical discomforts of knight errantry should remove any illusions that the Wart has:

Nowhere to sleep, never know where you are.
Rheumatism in the winter, sunstroke in the summer.
All this horrid armour takes hours to put on. When
it is on it's either frying or freezing, and it gets
rusty. You have to sit up all night polishing the
stuff. (p. 18)

This is surely a realistic account of the way of life that Malory describes for so many of his characters. Its deviation from the popular image, shared by the Wart, is the source of the comedy in this particular scene.

On a larger scale is the series of episodes concerning the counterfeit questing beast in "The Queen of Air and Darkness." It is the broadest comedy in The Once and Future King and is less successful than some of the other comic episodes, because it is not so well integrated. In "The Sword in the Stone" White undermines the dignity usually associated with knights errant by presenting King Pellinore and Sir Grummore as the medieval equivalent of foxhunters. This process is continued in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" by

having Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides dressing up as the Questing Beast. The episode is a mixture of pantomime and farce and it is interesting to note that these terms describing the broadest forms of comedy refer primarily to drama. Sir Palomides borrows the idea from various kinds of popular entertainer. He says: "joculators assume garb of animals -- as stags, goats and so forth -- and dance to bells and tabor with many gyrings and circumflexions" (p. 275). However, the final plan, with Sir Palomides as the head and Sir Grummore as the tail, suggests a pantomime horse. The construction of the pantomime Questing Beast is hindered by the failure of the two halves to agree about the appearance of their creation. For example:

"My dear chap, I tell you a libbard has black spots."

"Puce," Sir Palomides said obstinately.

"What is puce? And anyway we have not got any."

They glared at each other with the fury of creators. (p. 276)

The absurdity of the situation is heightened by the peculiarity of the Beast itself. The difficulty that the two knights have in co-operating in the construction of the animal continues when they try to use it. The scene is presented almost entirely through dialogue:

"We ought to practise a gallop. After all, we can't walk all the time, not when he is hunting us."

"Very good."

"When I say Go, then, Go. Ready, steady, Go!"

"Look out, Grummore, you are butting me."

"Buttin'?"

"Be careful of the bed."

"What did you say?"

"Oh dear!"

(p. 278)

The use of dialogue alone reflects the two knights' inability to see outside the costume. There is no character present who has an external view of their performance and the narrator reserves judgement: retreating into the background.

Farce becomes the dominant mode when the fake Beast unexpectedly meets the real Beast, who falls in love with her imitator. The Questing Beast's emotional problems are a comic echo of those of her master and the romantic ambitions of Queen Morgause. "The Queen of Air and Darkness" contains three cases of thwarted love, only one of which overcomes its difficulties. Pellinore's affair is one of genuine affection, but both Morgause and the Questing Beast fail because the objects of their affection are not real. Morgause failed to seduce the English knights because she was attempting to attract knights of her imagination rather than the real ones. The unfortunate Questing Beast, however, was the victim of Sir Palomides's and Sir Grummore's imaginations. The situation is finally resolved by Merlyn's anachronistic suggestion that they psycho-analyse the Beast. The Beast's unrequited love also poses the question of how a species with apparently only a single member can perpetuate itself. Obviously the whole episode has no origin in Le Morte Darthur. White, however, manages to construct a link:

The drawback was that she transferred her affection to the successful analyst -- to Palomides -- as so often happens in analysis -- and now she refused to take any further interest in her early master. King Pellinore, not without a few sighs for the good old days, was forced to resign his rights in her to the Saracen. This is why, although Malory clearly tells us that only a Pellinore could catch her, we always

find her being pursued by Sir Palomides in the later parts of the Morte d'Arthur. (p. 318)

It is difficult not to admire White's audacity in using a discrepancy in Malory to give authenticity to his own invention.

In assessing the effect of the comic episodes in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" it is apparent that the broadest comedy, such as the Questing Beast, and St. Toirdealbhach and Mother Morlan, takes place in Lothian. There is nothing comic about Lothian itself, which is a primitive and brutal place, but it seems to be the kind of place where strange things happen. The portrait of Lothian is based not on the north of Scotland, but on the part of Ireland where White lived at the time when he was working on The Witch in the Wood and "The Queen of Air and Darkness." The Out Isles have a similar atmosphere to Burkestown in The Elephant and the Kangaroo, which is based on Doolistown where White lived. Burkestown is certainly a place where strange things happen: the Archangel Michael, for instance, comes down the chimney to announce another Flood.²³ Such an occurrence would not be out of place in Lothian. The Irish connection is emphasised by St. Toirdealbhach, whose name is Irish rather than Scots Gaelic,²⁴ who tells the boys Irish stories, and who is the

²³ White, The Elephant and the Kangaroo, pp. 14-26.

²⁴ During his time in Ireland White occasionally signed his letters Toirdealbac Ó Zealain. See, for example, a letter to Mary Potts dated 1st August 1939 in Letters to a Friend, p. 104. The first part of the signature means "one shaped like a tower or steeple" (White was tall), and the

proud owner of a shillelagh. Part of the comedy in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" derives from the clash of English and Celtic culture and the mutual lack of understanding, such as that between Morgause and the English knights. White had experienced the clash at first hand, and created an imaginary Scotland out of his own experience of rural Ireland.

Comedy is not confined to characters and incidents in the first two books of The Once and Future King: it pervades the whole book. The main vehicle for this comedy is the attitude and comments of the narrator. White establishes a narrative character who can maintain a sufficient distance from the other characters to comment humorously on their actions. The narrative technique of The Once and Future King was discussed in Chapter Five, but in this chapter the comic aspects of the technique will be considered further.

The narrator of The Once and Future King frequently steps outside the fiction and addresses the reader directly, often in the second person. The effect is to emphasize that a story is being told, and to establish a relationship appropriate to a story-teller and receiver. This is the primary relationship in the book, and it enables White, for example, to stop writing about the characters in order to give his reader some information about medieval castles or hunting. An important element in the relationship is that both the narrator and

second part means "white." I am indebted to Mr. Brinley Rees for the translation.

reader, unlike the characters, inhabit the twentieth century. The narrator does not use his twentieth-century knowledge to patronize his characters or encourage the reader to do so. Furthermore, the reader is not allowed to be the narrator's equal, and this inequality, which allows White to play games with the reader, is an important source of comedy in The Once and Future King.

"The Sword in the Stone" presents an idealized childhood world. White idealizes even the weather:

In the spring, the little flowers came out obediently in the meads, and the dew sparkled and the birds sang. In the summer it was beautifully hot for no less than four months, and, if it did rain just enough for agricultural purposes, they managed to arrange it so that it rained while you were in bed. In the autumn the leaves flamed and rattled before the west winds, tempering their sad adieu with glory. And in the winter, which was confined by statute to two months, the snow lay evenly, three feet thick, but never turned into slush. (p. 137)

This passage makes fun of the convention, literary as well as popular, that the weather one remembers in one's childhood is usually good.²⁵ White combines an exaggeration of convention with some very effective and economical description of the weather. "The leaves flamed and rattled before the west winds" would be appropriate to a serious description of autumn weather, but becomes amusing when combined with other perfect meteorological phenomena. Part of the effectiveness of the passage lies in its link, however slender, to reality.

²⁵ Cf. L.P. Hartley The Go-Between (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953).

In "The Sword in the Stone" White has created an ideal agricultural society which he is unwilling to undermine in any respect. Therefore the weather must accommodate the needs of farmers as well as small boys. White draws attention to this unrealistic weather by concentrating the description of it in this passage. He nevertheless maintains a balance between idealization on the one hand and on the other exaggeration approaching satire.

The narrator delights in his own cleverness, both in the fact of his possession of knowledge foreign to the reader and in the volume of that knowledge. He is always willing to pass on information: the descriptions of the Castle of the Forest Sauvage and of the art of tilting have already been discussed in this context. On other occasions he displays a dazzling breadth of knowledge in a way which communicates little to the reader but draws attention to itself. During the boar hunt White flourishes the terms "os and argos, suet and grease, croteys, fewmets and fiants" (p. 142) without any explanation. Apart from a pleasure in the words themselves, the reason for their inclusion is to reveal the narrator as a character who can dazzle the reader with his expertise in many fields. At the same time, however, he is making fun of people who flourish such knowledge, as is shown by Twyti's reaction: "he knew that you were showing off your knowledge of these words, which were to him a business" (p. 142). Thus the attitude of the narrator is constantly shifting; he makes fun of characters, of the reader, and of himself.

The list is a characteristic technique of White's comic style. At various points throughout The Once and Future King the narrator presents long lists of objects or people whose vividness and variety are attractive. The economy of description and juxtaposition of objects within the list are also sources of comedy. One example is the inside of Merlyn's cottage, another is King Pellinore's wedding:

The pontifical nuptial high mass was celebrated by such a galaxy of cardinals and bishops and nuncios that there seemed to be no part of the immense church which was not teeming with violet and scarlet and incense and little boys ringing silver bells. Sometimes a boy would rush at a bishop and ring a bell at him. Sometimes a nuncio would pounce on a cardinal and cense him all over. (p. 320)

The tone is slightly irreverent, using words such as "galaxy" and "teeming." The little boys and nuncios seem rather aggressive as they rush and pounce on people to perform their functions. It must be remembered that this is King Pellinore's wedding, and the confusion apparent in the description is, therefore, the more appropriate. Nevertheless, the passage does present a realistic picture of the kind of great festival where many officials seem to be performing their own functions but an observer has no idea what is happening or why. The description ends with the sort of gratuitous and amusing detail which is an important feature of the narrative style of The Once and Future King: "even the Pope, who was as keen as anybody that the thing should go with a swing, had kindly sent a number of indulgences for everybody he could think of" (p.32). It is an apparently superfluous sentence because the Pope does not play a part in the story until

almost the end of the book when he arranges the peace between Lancelot and Arthur. This comment also reveals White's tendency to make fun of figures of authority. The humour lies in the tone of the sentence. The colloquial language contrasts with the formality of official Papal pronouncements. It does not mock the Pope, which would inject a harsh note inappropriate to the atmosphere of the wedding and the book as a whole. It merely suggests that the Pope is a kindly sort of person, who is anxious to help in any way he can.

It has been argued that White's book is a satire. Crane reads parts of "The Sword in the Stone" as a satire on chivalry, particularly the episodes with King Pellinore and Sir Grummore.²⁶ This, however, is a serious misreading of the work. There is no doubt that White did have some slight satirical intent in these passages, but satire is too strong a word to apply without reservation to the humour of The Once and Future King as a whole. The most appropriate word is "fun." The childlike connotations of this term should not be avoided, because White valued the childlike attitude which, he claimed, the Middle Ages possessed: "in those days even the grown-up people were so childish that they saw nothing uninteresting in being turned into owls" (p. 180). It is consistent with this view that the first two books should have children as their chief characters. The children are not, however, idealized. The faults of Kay, Gawaine, and Agravaine are presented explicitly and although Arthur and Gareth

²⁶ Crane, pp. 75-76.

are not so flawed, they are not unrealistically good. The childlike tone is the source of some of the humour in the books, but it is also necessary to the later tragedies. Arthur's personal tragedy is the loss of the innocence and wonder of his childhood, and the wider tragedy of his failure to create a kingdom in the image of the Forest Sauvage.

The dominant mode of the first two books of The Once and Future King is comic. Both have plots that integrate the protagonist with society and both are largely humorous. The tragic mode is more important in "The Ill-Made Knight" and "The Candle in the Wind," and its power is greater because of the contrast with the earlier books. White identified incest as the cause of Arthur's downfall, his error in the Aristotelian sense. This analysis, however, refers only to Arthur's own story, and not to the whole of Le Morte Darthur or The Once and Future King. White was also aware of the tragic qualities of the other parts of the story, and identified three tragic themes: "1 The Cornwall Feud, existing ever since Arthur's father killed Gawaine's grandfather, 2 The Nemesis of Incest . . . , and 3 The Guenever-Lancelot romance."²⁷ Each of these themes will be discussed more fully below, but the links between them are important elements to the tragic tone of the book.

²⁷ White in a letter to L.J. Potts dated 28th June 1939 in Letters to a Friend, p. 98.

White identifies three tragic themes in the story of Arthur, but it is Arthur's personal tragedy that dominates The Once and Future King. At the end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" the narrator presents the genealogical table showing the relationships between Arthur, the Cornwalls and the Orkneys, and he comments:

This pedigree is a vital part of the tragedy of King Arthur. It is why Sir Thomas Mallory called his very long book the Death of Arthur. Although nine tenths of the story seems to be about knights jousting and quests for the holy grail and things of that sort, the narrative is a whole, and it deals with the reasons why the young man came to grief at the end. It is the tragedy, the Aristotelian and comprehensive tragedy, of sin coming home to roost.
(p. 323)

In making such an analytic comment the narrator is stepping further outside the fiction than almost anywhere else in the book. In addition to reminding the reader of the relationship between The Once and Future King and Le Morte Darthur he comments on the unity of Malory's book. This has a particular interest in the light of the controversy precipitated by Vinaver's argument that Malory wrote not one book but eight separate tales.²⁹ White, in making the narrator step outside the story, is treating it in a way quite foreign to the tradition of the mainstream novel, where it is rare for a narrator to anticipate the end of a story in this way and to comment on the kind of story he is telling. It is easier for White to do so because he is writing in the classical and medieval tradition of the re-told story; he can

²⁹ Vinaver, ed. The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, 2nd ed. (1967), pp. xxxv-lvi.

assume that the reader already knows that Arthur ultimately meets a tragic fate.

White emphasizes the structural importance of the incest as the origin of the tragedy by placing it at the end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness," immediately after Arthur's success at Bedegraine. Its position at the end of a book gives it emphasis within that book; it is also the central event of The Once and Future King as a whole. The end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" marks a key point in the change of tone in The Once and Future King. The change is achieved with considerable subtlety, because the characters continue to behave in the ways established in the earlier books. The violent relationships of the Orkney brothers as children anticipate the breakdown in the values of the Round Table. The character of Arthur continues to represent all the positive values of his childhood. In terms of plot and structure, however, the end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" is the turning point of the book.

In defeating Lot Arthur consolidates his position as king and anticipates being able to govern in peace:

It had been a tiring day, although he had reached the full strength of his youth, and he leaned his head against the back of his throne, thinking about the events of the marriage. He had been fighting, on and off, ever since the he had come to be King by drawing the sword out of the stone, and the anxiety of these campaigns had grown him into a splendid fellow. At last it looked as if he might have peace. He thought of the joys of peace, of being married himself one day as Merlyn had prophesied, and of having a home. (p. 322)

This paragraph comprehends the conjunction of Arthur's personal and regal happiness and achievement. Later parts of the book describe the great successes of the Round Table, but for Arthur all later glories are undermined by the knowledge of his sin, and of Mordred as the embodiment of that sin. In one short paragraph, therefore, is the whole of Arthur's uncontaminated adult success.

The tragic nature of the plot hinges on Arthur's ignorance of the relationship between himself and Morgause, and his consequent ignorance that they were committing incest. White casts a fog over who instigated the relationship, but on the whole is inclined to blame Morgause. As the tragic plot of The Once and Future King is derived from Malory, it is useful at this point to compare White's book with his source. White used both Strachey's edition and Rhys's Everyman edition of Malory and the differences between the two versions may have affected his telling of the story. Strachey's reads:

And thither came to him Lot's wife of Orkney, in manner of a messenger, but she was sent thither to espy the court of king Arthur; and she came richly beseen with her four sons, Gawaine, Gaheris, Agravaine, and Gareth, with many other knights and ladies, and she was a passing fair lady, wherefore the king cast great love unto her, and so was Mordred born, and she was his sister, on the mother side, Igraine. So there she rested her a month, and at the last departed. Then the king dreamed a marvellous dream whereof he was sore adread. But all this time king Arthur knew not that king Lot's wife was his sister.²⁹

²⁹ I xvii; Strachey, p. 42.

The Everyman edition reads:

And thither came to him King Lot's wife, of Orkney, in manner of a message, but she was sent thither to espy the court of King Arthur; and she came richly bisene, with her four sons Gawaine, Gaheris, Agravaine, and Gareth, with many other knights and ladies. For she was a passing fair lady, therefore the king cast a great love unto her, and desired to lie by her; so they were agreed, and he begat upon her Mordred, and she was his sister, on the mother's side, Igraine. So there she rested her a month, and at the last departed. Then the king dreamed a marvellous dream whereof he was sore adread. But all this time King Arthur knew not that King Lot's wife was his sister.³⁰

The difference between the two is that the Everyman edition is fuller and states that the king "desired to lie by her" thereby implying that Arthur was the instigator of the affair. However, it also states that "they were agreed" and therefore Morgause has a more active part in the episode than in Strachey's edition. Her behaviour is in contrast to Igraine's when faced with the same demand from Uther Pendragon. A point on which both versions are explicit is that Arthur did not know that Morgause was his sister. Malory does not, however, mention whether she knew that Arthur was her brother. Malory's presentation of the moral position is subtle: Arthur knew that he sinned in committing adultery, but was unaware that he was also committing incest. Morgause's moral position is weakened in both versions by her coming to court as a spy. White had access to two versions of the story, containing different amounts of detail, neither of which explicitly apportion blame for the sin. Whichever version White used it is clear that the editor's inclusion or

³⁰ I xix; Rhys pp. 34-35.

omission of a detail at this point affects the balance of the rest of the story.

White is less even-handed. Morgause does not come to court as a spy; she comes with the intention of seducing Arthur and of using magic to do so. In addition to her immediate motivation, she has been presented throughout "The Queen of Air and Darkness" as a morally equivocal and perhaps mentally unbalanced character, all the more dangerous because of her supernatural talents. Finally, however, White draws back from placing all the responsibility on Morgause:

It is impossible to explain how these things happen. Perhaps the Spancel had a strength in it. Perhaps it was because she was twice his age, so that she had twice the power of his weapons. Perhaps it was because Arthur was always a simple fellow, who took people at their own valuation easily. Perhaps it was because he had never known a mother of his own, so that the rôle of mother love, as she stood with her children behind her, took him between wind and water. (p. 322)

It could be argued that White, in emphasizing "perhaps," is refusing to address the real question of why his hero slept with his own sister. However, the sentence "it is impossible to explain how these things happen" expresses perfectly the realities behind such a situation. In emotional relationships there are no simple answers. Any glib answer would undermine the areas of uncertainty that are necessary to a vivid characterization, and for White the presentation of character is an important element in the work. This is a significant area of deviation from Aristotle's idea of tragedy, in which character is less important than action. White places less of

the responsibility on Arthur than Malory does, but he seems to recognize that Morgause cannot be solely responsible without making Arthur appear a weak fool. In the final sentence of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" White echoes Malory's explicit statement that Arthur was ignorant of the incestuous nature of the relationship: "the king had slept with his own sister. He did not know he was doing so, and perhaps it may have been due to her, but it seems, in tragedy, that innocence is not enough" (p. 323). Even in the final sentence the suggestion that Morgause was responsible is reinforced, but again White stops short of an explicit accusation. As forceful as Malory's, however, is his assertion that Arthur did not know that Morgause was his sister.

The sexual relationship between Arthur and his sister is the pivot of his personal tragedy and can be seen as an error in the Aristotelian sense. The connection between the act and Arthur's downfall seems to be quite clear. Mordred is the product of the incestuous relationship and ultimately kills his father. However, the chain of cause and effect is not that simple. By the end of the story other tragic themes have become inextricably linked to Arthur's own tragedy.

Mordred and Agravaine use the relationship between Guenever and Lancelot to destroy Arthur. Agravaine has a personal grudge against Lancelot, but Mordred wants revenge against the King for the attempt that Arthur made on his life. This is a difficult issue for White, but it is an important part of

of the motivation for Mordred's hatred of Arthur. Malory presents the story of the babies set afloat to drown in its chronological place after the conception of Mordred. Having slept with Morgause, Arthur is disturbed by a strange dream (I 19: Spisak, p. 54), and learns the truth through Merlin's prophecies (I 20: Spisak, p. 55). Responsibility for the murder of the babies is not placed entirely on Arthur's shoulders. At the beginning of the chapter Merlin repeats his prophesy: "For Merlyn told Kynge Arthur that he that shold destroye him shold be borne on May Day" (I 27: Spisak, p. 61). As a result public reaction to the murder is directed against Merlin: "so many lordes and barons of this reame were displeasyd, for her children were so lost, and many put the wyte on Merlyn more than on Arthur" (I 27: Spisak, p. 61). For a character like Arthur to commit such an act at the beginning of his reign is clearly a problem for an author, and Malory deals with it quite subtly by making the public blame Merlin. This is much more effective than a narrative comment absolving Arthur, because he must command the respect of the "lordes and barons" if he^{is} to rule successfully. The whole^{is} episode recalls the massacre of the innocents (Matthew ii. 16), but it would clearly be inappropriate to Malory's larger purpose for Arthur to be identified with King Herod.

White delays treating the episode until much later in his book. The reason for this is structural and bears on the nature of Arthur's tragic error. It has been noted that the relationship between Arthur and Morgause is given structural

prominence by its position at the end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness." It is followed immediately by "The Ill-Made Knight" in which the focus moves from Arthur to Lancelot, and it would not be appropriate to introduce the massacre there. White prefers to leave the subject altogether and to reintroduce it much later in the book. However, White sacrifices the effect that Malory achieves by introducing the massacre early. Malory's reader is aware that Arthur not only slept with his sister, but sinned further in killing the children. White's Arthur has been pronounced innocent of knowingly committing incest (p. 323), and his subsequent crime is not presented until much later.

Throughout The Once and Future King White gives Arthur a gentle and sensitive character. His attempt to drown the babies does not appear consistent with this, although his confession to Lancelot and Guenever is. White develops the character so that he ages, and the old man's recollection of the young man's crime seems almost to refer to a character not in the book. The actual confession, and the shame that Arthur feels are, however, consistent with the character as he appeared earlier:

"I have been a wicked man . . ."

"Arthur," exclaimed the Queen, "you are not to say so. It is so ridiculous that it makes me feel ashamed."

"You would not call me a wicked man?" he asked in surprise.

"Of course not."

"But I should have thought, after the story of those babies. . ."

"Nobody," cried Lancelot fiercely, "would dream of such a thing." (p. 581)

Arthur's own straightforward morality makes him judge himself more harshly than others do. Lancelot's and Guenever's reactions echo those of the "lordes and barons" in Malory, Lancelot says: "If I could lay my hands on the brutes who frighten children with stories about sin, I would break their necks. What good does it do? Think of all that suffering, and for nothing!" (p. 579). It is significant that unlike Malory White does not say it was Merlyn who prophesied that evil would come of Mordred's birth. The prophecies are realistic rather than supernatural:

Everybody told me what a dreadful sin it was, and how nothing but sorrow would come of it, and also a lot of other things about what Mordred would be like if he was born. They frightened me with horrible prophecies. (p. 578-9)

White achieves the same effect as Malory in shifting the blame for the murder from Arthur to his advisers. The difference, however, lies in the chronology of the revelation. Throughout most of The Once and Future King the reader is aware of Arthur's having committed one sin and knows that Mordred is a physical reminder of it. At the beginning of "The Candle in the Wind," however, a second sin is introduced, which must elicit some sympathy for Mordred. The strength of Mordred's hatred for his father is more understandable, considering that not only is he the offspring of an incestuous relationship, but also his father tried to murder him. The complexity of Arthur's family relationships as an adult contrasts with the simplicity of the childhood values of "The Sword in the

Stone."

Arthur's personal tragedy springs from his sin in sleeping with his sister, and secondarily from his murder of the babies. The story of incest and revenge fits the pattern described by Aristotle. Arthur's story is more complicated, however, and taken as a whole lacks the purity of an Aristotelian tragic plot. A further deviation from Aristotle's model is that the tragic plot gains impetus from Arthur's character. His generous nature gives his enemies the opportunity to destroy him. He is aware of the love between Lancelot and Guenever, but his love for both of them prevents him from confronting them with the truth. He is also aware of the danger that their relationship could be used by his enemies, but again he prefers to trust to their judgement rather than take action on his own account. For example, he says to Lancelot:

"Mordred is an unhappy young man, and I am afraid he might try any means of giving me an upset. If, for instance, he could see a way of getting at me through you, dear, or through Gwen, I am sure he would try it. Do you see what I mean?"

"I see."

"So if there should ever come a moment when either of you might, well...might give him a sort of handle...you will be careful of me, won't you? I am in your hands, dears." (p. 581)

Lancelot's answer to the problem of Mordred is that Arthur should "cut the sniveller's head off, and have done with him" (p. 579). Arthur rejects this option because of the same generosity and kindness that prevented him from accusing Lancelot and Guenever of adultery. There are also other

reasons, Arthur says:

Mordred is my son. I am fond of him. I have done the boy a great deal of wrong, and my family has always somehow been hurting the Cornwalls, and I couldn't add to the wickedness. Besides I am his father. I can see myself in him. (p. 580)

Arthur's natural affection for his son together with his guilt about the massacre of the children prevent him from removing the obvious danger that Mordred presents.

Arthur's sins as a young man are the main causes of his downfall, but the results of those sins are only able to destroy Arthur because of his attempts to atone for them, and because of his kindness and generosity. The tragedy of Arthur is not a clear-cut progression from error to consequence because it^{is} so closely connected to the other tragic themes of the book. The Cornwall-Pendragon feud and the Lancelot and Guenever story do not conform to the Aristotelian tragic pattern, and a wider view of the nature of tragedy must therefore be taken. They differ from the classical pattern in that they are concerned not with a single individual who must face the consequences of his own actions, but with two people, or a group of people, whose relationships with each other or with the outside world bring disaster. These elements do not have a tragic hero, nor a single tragic error. The stories of the Orkneys or Lancelot, Guenever, and Elaine are not subplots. They are not complete stories in their own right but are closely related to the main plot of Arthur's downfall. The relationship between the various plot elements is dictated

by the history of Arthurian romance as a group of originally unrelated stories and characters. The international growth of Arthurian matter, spanning several centuries, resulted in a complexity that is alien to Aristotelian or Shakespearian tragedy.

The story of the origin of the Cornwall feud is told very vividly by Gawaine to his brothers at the beginning of "The Queen of Air and Darkness." Like the story of Arthur and Morgause, the story of Uther and Igraine is derived from Malory, and Gawaine's telling of the story in parts echoes Malory's. For example:

I suppose that we were sente for that I shold be dishonoured, wherefor, husband, I counceille yow that we departe from hens sodenly, that we maye ryde all nyghte vnto oure owne castell.

(I 1: Spisak, p. 33)

and:

She said: "I suppose we were sent for that I should be dishonoured. Wherefore, husband, I counsel you that we depart from hence suddenly, that we may ride all night to our own castle." (p. 219)

Gawaine does not tell the story entirely in Malory's words. He also uses constructions and vocabulary which owe something to Celtic tradition and thus emphasize the viewpoint from which the story is told. For example, "there they saddled their prancing, fire-eyed, swift-footed, symmetrical, large-lipped, small-headed, vehement steeds" (p. 219). Gawaine's retelling of the story omits Arthur's conception and birth, which is the most significant part. However, at this stage in

the book that story is not generally known; it is not even known to Arthur. For the Orkneys, the story of Uther and Igraine is not the story of Arthur's mysterious birth, but an example of the treachery and brutality of the English. The placing of the story at the beginning of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" forms the basis on which the characters of the brothers are built, as discussed in Chapter Five. It also establishes the kind of society in which the boys grow up as one which constantly looks back to old grievances, looking forward only to plan revenge.

The selection from Malory of material concerning the Orkney brothers reinforces White's presentation of them as a clan. Episodes in which one of the Orkney brothers acts alone are omitted, or referred to only in passing. White does not tell the whole story of Gawaine and Gaheris following the white hart as it appears in Malory (III 5-8: Spisak, pp 83-86), instead he simply mentions Gawaine's killing of the lady (p. 346) which occurs in the course of that quest. In Le Morte Darthur Gareth's exceptional status and difference from his brothers is established at considerable length in "The Tale of Gareth." The structure of The Once and Future King does not allow White such a long digression. Instead, he has Arthur summarize the story:

It has come to be quite a legend how the boy arrived at court anonymously, so that his own brothers didn't recognize him, and how he worked in the kitchen, and got nick-named Beaumains when Kay wanted to be nasty, and how you were the only person who was decent to him until he did he great adventure and became a knight. (p. 448)

This passage establishes the special relationship between Lancelot and Gareth which is important later in the book. It also suggests a parallel between Gareth and Arthur, who also received a nickname from Kay. The passage does not, however, create Gareth's character, which is developed much more in the context of the Orkney clan than is Malory's Gareth. White creates a distance between Gareth and his brothers by his behaviour at the unicorn hunt, and his rôle as peacemaker in the family squabbles. The relationships between the brothers are stronger in The Once and Future King than in Le Morte Darthur, and can therefore carry the burden of tragedy that White places on them.

For the Orkney brothers motivation as a group is more important than as individuals. Gawaine is the most conscious of his duty to the family throughout his life. When he tells the story of Uther and Igraine, for example, his reaction is "that it was intensely wrong for anything to succeed against his own clan" (p. 222). This aspect of his character results in his continuing the war against Lancelot for family reasons. The original desire for revenge against the House of Pendragon seems, however, to disappear, at least in the four older brothers. As children they vowed revenge for Igraine's rape but throughout their lives they serve as loyal vassals of Arthur. They are proud of their family and sometimes Gawaine is brutal and misguided in his pride, but the sons of King Lot and Queen Morgause are loyal to Arthur. Nevertheless they do cause him difficulties.

A related problem during the last two books of The Once and Future King is the Lot-Pellinore feud. It is foreshadowed by Pellinore's appearance in the Out Isles, having been deposited there, with Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides, by the magic barge. The three knights are culturally alien to Lothian, although they are welcomed by Morgause as a diversion. The first, unsuccessful unicorn hunt is suggested by Morgause as a means of taking Pellinore's mind off his interrupted romance by interesting him in his old pursuits. Pellinore is the unwitting instigator of unicorn hunting in "The Queen of Air and Darkness," which is so important in the creation of the boys' characters.

Pellinore becomes more closely involved with the Orkneys when he accidentally kills King Lot in a joust. It seems rather out of character for White's King Pellinore to have killed anyone jousting, but it is explained as an effect of his marriage: "the trouble is that he has got so valiant since he married the Queen's daughter of Flanders that he has taken to jousting in earnest, and quite often wins" (p. 346). The Orkneys' subsequent murder of Lamorak is partly a result of the feud against Pellinore, but Lamorak's affair with Morgause is also part of the motivation. Lamorak's death draws together a number of threads in the characterization of the Orkneys. The event follows the death of Pellinore, and is part of a pattern of killing. When Arthur learns that Lamorak is having an affair with his sister he sees the danger at once: "'Good God!' he exclaimed. 'And Lamorak's father

killed her husband! And her son killed Lamorak's father! and Lamorak is hardly of age!"' (p. 449).

Lamorak's death is important because it reveals more about the morals of the Orkneys. Gareth is not present at the murder and learns about it by letter. He is thus dissociated from the worst crime of his brothers. The killing of Morgause and her young lover bring to the surface the violent undercurrents in the Orkneys' family relationships. It is Agravaine who finally kills his mother; it is the only way for him ^{to} prevent her love affairs and finally satisfy his "curious ^{to} feelings" (p.222) about her. In Malory, however, Gaheris is the murderer (X 24; Spisak p. 319). White, by making this alteration to his source, accentuates Agravaine's destructiveness and ⁱanticipates his part in the final ⁱdestruction of the Round Table. Although Agravaine's sexual desire towards his mother and his consequent jealousy of her lovers are never articulated by him or his brothers, Gareth at least is aware of Agravaine's feelings. When reporting the events to Arthur and Lancelot Gareth says: "He killed our mother in her blood. . . I always knew he would" (p. 451). Agravaine's feelings combined with his brutality and cowardice make such an outcome inevitable, but tragic in only a minor and peripheral way. Lamorak is actually killed by Mordred, but the murder, as Gareth describes it, is the responsibility of all the brothers: "'They surrounded him," he said numbly, "and Mordred stabbed him in the back"' (p. 452).

The significance of the Lot-Pellinore feud lies in the extra dimension it gives to the Orkney brothers and the code by which they live. Arthur's affection for them is based purely on family ties because, with the exception of Gareth, he recognizes that they do not share the values of the Round Table. They are not tragic characters, but together they precipitate various events which contribute to the overall tragedy. When the values of the Orkneys come into conflict with those of the Round Table it is the latter which must give way because Arthur believes in mercy. He is committed, by both principle and natural affection, to attempt to understand why the brothers behave as they do. He tries to persuade both Lancelot and Aglovale to do the same: "Lancelot, if you had only known my sister -- if you had known the Orkneys at home. They are mad on their family" (p. 450) and "It is a pity you never had the opportunity of seeing the Orkneys at home. They didn't have a happy family life like yours" (p. 474). Arthur does not try to excuse their behaviour; he simply asks for understanding. In doing so he allows them to continue in their own tradition, which culminates with Gawaine insisting that the war of vengeance against Lancelot be continued. As with Arthur's own tragedy it is his reluctance to impose his standards on those he loves that allows events to culminate in tragedy. He is helpless in the face of the Orkneys' obsessive dedication to family loyalty. The story of the Orkneys and their various feuds is an integral part of the tragedy of The Once and Future King. White selects material from Malory which emphasizes their group identity and

reconstructs it in patterns which counterpoint Arthur's own life.

A similar technique is used to portray the love between Lancelot and Guenever. Unlike Malory, White chooses to explain the origin of the relationship because he wishes to explore the psychology of the lovers. In Le Morte Darthur love between Lancelot and Guenever is taken for granted for much of the book, and assumes a great importance at the end. White, however, gives the affair a constant degree of attention throughout "The Ill-Made Knight" and "The Candle in the Wind." The tragedy of the beginning of the affair is that although the reader recognizes that it is inevitable, because Merlyn has prophesied it, the characters are totally unprepared for it. Lancelot has spent three years training to be worthy of Arthur's ideals and affection, and he resents Guenever as the usurper of that affection. Guenever's initial reaction is more generous; she wants simply to be kind to her husband's friend:

King Arthur had asked his wife to be kind to the young man. She was fond of her husband, and she realized that she had come between him and his friend. She was not such a fool as to try to atone to Lancelot for this, but she had taken a fancy for him as himself. She liked his broken face, however hideous it was, and Arthur had asked her to be kind.
(p. 347)

The description of an affair between two people whose initial feelings for each other are negative or neutral is very effective. The reader is probably already aware of the course of the relationship and of its dramatic end. White balances

these expectations by giving the love an almost commonplace beginning, but one which is consistent with the two characters.

The first stage of the affair between Lancelot and Guenever is controlled; they are aware of the danger and Lancelot counteracts it by leaving the court to go questing. The control breaks when other characters, Elaine for example, become involved in the situation. In the story of Elaine White undertakes his only large scale rearrangement of material from Le Morte Darthur in The Once and Future King. White conflates the stories of Elaine the mother of Galahad and Elaine of Astolat, who in Malory are two distinct characters. White was clear about his reasons for doing this:

In my reading of the matter, the maid who floats down to Camelot is the same one who gave birth to Galahad: a fat old matron, pathetic and abandoned: her son dead: no lily maid. In one way this is a sensible, economical step (almost the only place at which I have wandered from Malory) but in others it is a mistake. I did it largely because I thought that M. may have himself been muddling his sources in this matter -- for Lancelot's mother was herself called Elaine, and it seems too pathological to give him two mistresses of the same name. Also it keeps the plot neater to have a single Elaine as one of the main figures of its eternal quadrangle.³¹

In treating the two Elaines as a single character White gains considerable advantages in the plot and structure of "The Ill-Made Knight." He avoids the introduction of a new character late in the book, and uses the established character to good effect.

³¹ White, letter to L.J. Potts dated 9th April 1940, in Gallix, ed., Letters to a Friend, p. 114.

White's version and Malory's differ in their presentation of the character's first appearance. In Le Morte Darthur Elaine is conscious that her relationship with Lancelot is part of the fulfilment of a prophecy. When Lancelot accuses her of betraying him she defends herself:

I haue obeyed me vnto the prophecy that my fader teld me. And by his commaundement to fulfille this prophecy I haue gyuen the grettest rychesse and the fayrest floure that euer I had, and that is my maydenhode, that I shalle neuer haue ageyne.

(XI 3: Spisak, p. 402)

In expressing this view of her situation Malory's Elaine removes any suggestion of human responsibility for the event. It was prophesied that Galahad would be the son of Lancelot and the grandson of King Pelles; therefore it is fruitless to blame Elaine as Lancelot tries to do. White's Elaine has no idea of her part in a wider pattern of events. He does, however, give her a plausible psychological motivation, consistent with his practice elsewhere in the book: "if the finest knight in the world rescued you out of a kettle of boiling water, with no clothes on, you would be likely to fall in love with him -- if you were only eighteen" (p. 389). The prophetic pattern is not entirely absent from White's account, but it is introduced by Lancelot rather than Elaine. After accusing her of stealing his power to work miracles, Lancelot tries to soften his reaction and says "'probably your father made you do it, so as to have the eighth degree from Our Lord in the family" (p. 392-3). His reaction denies Elaine any power over her own actions, and her character later in the book is consistent with this. She always takes the

line of least resistance.

Elaine's life and physical appearance contrast at every level with Guenever's. Although she is beautiful when Lancelot first rescues her, it is a youthful beauty which soon fades. There is a sharp contrast with Guenever whose beauty lasts into old age. For example, on the night when she and Lancelot are caught "she looked singularly lovely, not like a film star, but like a woman who had grown a soul" (p. 596). Elaine herself recognizes the apparent injustice of Guenever's having a husband and yet keeping Lancelot as a lover. She says:

You have a fine husband of your own, the greatest in the land. You are a Queen, with honour and happiness and a home. I had no home, and no husband, and my honour was gone too. Why would you not let me have him? (p. 415)

The question is a demonstration of the naïvety that Elaine shows again in bringing her baby to court, and flourishing the most important contrast between herself and Guenever.

The story of Elaine is not a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense. White presents it as a commonplace story of unrequited love linked to the grander story of Lancelot and Guenever. Elaine is created as a deliberately unromantic character, who when faced with a lifetime alone "had done the ungraceful thing as usual. Guenever, in similar circumstances, would have been sure to grow pale and interesting -- but Elaine had only grown plump" (p. 425). Her situation is not a remarkable

one, except in the destiny of her son. She is simply an unexceptional woman whose life has not turned out as she had hoped, and who must make the best of things. Her indirect rôle in the affairs of Arthur's kingdom is a crucial one, but she herself is unsuited to play an active part. White creates a character for whom we feel sympathy, particularly when she expects that Lancelot will stay with her after the Corbin tournament. He agrees to wear her favour as part of his disguise in the tournament and the narrator comments "it was a scarlet sleeve embroidered with large pearls. You can do good embroidery in twenty years" (p. 519). The second sentence has an emphatic position at the end of a paragraph, and is a poignant evocation of Elaine's life without Lancelot. The simple and understated language, for example, the embroidery is "good," not beautiful or intricate, is appropriate to an ordinary woman leading a dull life. She is not an attractive character, but she demands sympathy as someone whose life is destroyed by events beyond her control or understanding. Elaine is an important element in the relationship between Lancelot and Guenever. She is the catalyst for the consummation of their affair, for Lancelot's madness, and it is she who nurses him back to health. Through their son Lancelot is able to participate partially in the achievement of the Holy Grail. As long as Elaine is alive, however, Guenever is suspicious of Lancelot's feeling for her.

The effect of the love between Lancelot and Guenever on the three main characters has been discussed in Chapter Five.

For most of the book their relationship is held in equilibrium and has no tragic dimension. The importance of the balance is recognized by Arthur, who was "strong and gentle enough to hope that, if he trusted Lancelot and Guenever, things would come right in the end" (p. 407). Only when the balance is disturbed, for example by Elaine, or by the accusations against the Queen by Sir Mador and Sir Meliagrance, does the situation threaten to grow to a tragic dimension. The eventual tragedy of the relationship is in the repercussions its discovery has on the Round Table.

Guenever is not, by any standards, a tragic character. As portrayed by White she is a powerful and competent woman who obeys her instincts, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. Lancelot appears to aspire more to the status of tragic hero, but most of his suffering is a result of the discrepancy between his life and his religious ideal. A character's failure to live up to a Christian ideal is not the fatal flaw of a tragic hero. If it were, most Christian characters would be tragic heroes or heroines. Furthermore, Lancelot does not meet a tragic fate, but survives the destruction of the Round Table and spends the rest of his life in serving God. It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the love between Lancelot and Guenever is not tragic as it affects the lovers. As Mordred and Agravaine's means of destroying the Round Table, however, the love affair is an important factor in the tragedy of Arthur.

The combination of the tragic and comic modes in The Once and Future King is a vital feature in the special quality of the work. The comedy in "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness" functions principally in incident, presentation of character and narrative tone. The characteristic comic plot has a limited relevance. The comedy in "The Sword in the Stone" creates a world in which people are basically kind, and even if, like Kay, they do not appear to be so, they still merit understanding and consideration. The Wart enjoys his strange experiences and the reader shares his enjoyment with little consciousness of threat. The only threat is time and the fact that the Wart must grow up. However, these events take place after the end of "The Sword in the Stone" and are therefore isolated. There is a greater threat in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" in which the childhoods of the Orkneys do not have the same quality of a golden age that the Wart's has. Cruelty and lack of love are already part of the experience of Morgause's children.

The tragic element in The Once and Future King, unlike the comic, is implicit in the plot. The events of Arthur's life, particularly in his relationships with Morgause and Mordred, correspond to the pattern of an Aristotelian tragedy. There are, however, significant departures from this pattern. The protagonist of Aristotelian tragedy is a person of ordinary stature and goodness. Arthur, as a great king, fits better into the medieval idea of tragedy as the downfall of a leader. Furthermore, "the heart's king of a chivalry" and

"the badge of everything that was good in the Middle Ages" (p. 564) is more than an ordinarily good man. The plot of "The Ill-Made Knight" and "The Candle in the Wind" is also more complex than the typical plot of Aristotelian tragedy. The stories of the Orkneys, King Pellinore, Lancelot and Guenever, and Elaine, although sad, are not tragic in themselves, and are intricately involved with Arthur's own story. Arthur's personal story shows a limited correspondence with the pattern of tragedy, but with tragedy in its wider sense, not simply that described by Aristotle. However, the story of the fall of the Round Table is too complex to be understood simply as a tragedy.

The combination of the tragic and comic modes is the special feature of The Once and Future King, but it must be stressed that the book is not a tragicomedy. That term implies a plot that has all the hallmarks of tragedy, but in which the tragic ending is averted and a comic resolution takes place. It should also be noted that the comic and tragic modes are not combined within the individual books of The Once and Future King. There is a division between the comic mode of the first two books and the tragic mode of the last two. The result of this arrangement is that the initial comedy creates a golden age of childhood for the protagonists, which is lost as a result of the later tragic events. "The Sword in the Stone" and "The Queen of Air and Darkness," in addition to evoking an atmosphere of childhood innocence, even Orkney is described as "Eden-like" (p. 247), both end with

festivals that affirm hope for the future. At the end of "The Sword in the Stone," the Wart becomes King Arthur, and although such a passage into maturity inevitably brings loss it also brings hope. Arthur, who has learned the value of love and respect for the ways of others, is destined to resolve the conflicts and end the violence that characterized his father's reign. The double marriage at the end of "The Queen of Air and Darkness" is a conventional comic ending that affirms a new order and a prospect of new life. Both books therefore have an optimistic ending, but in "The Queen of Air and Darkness" this is immediately undermined. The tragic element of "The Ill-Made Knight" and "The Candle in the Wind" is Arthur's ultimate failure, even with the assistance of the greatest knight in the world, to achieve what he hoped for, and to maintain the achievement. The final chapter of "The Candle in the Wind" and the whole of The Book of Merlyn is not concerned with Arthur's personal tragedy but with his inability to create a lasting peace: "the fate of this man or that man was less than a drop, although it was a sparkling one, in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea" (p. 677). The power of The Once and Future King lies not in the story of one character, however tragic, but in the image of a peace that can never be a permanent achievement.

Chapter Eleven

Conclusion

It is possible to isolate features of a literary work and identify them as belonging to a given genre. Usually a work will show a majority of features belonging to a single genre. The Once and Future King, however, is large and varied enough to allow for an interplay of genres on a unusual scale. They overlay each other and move in and out of dominance in a complex pattern. Some genres operate throughout the book, whereas others work only a limited area.

In Fowler's theory of genre the term kind indicates a group of works sharing an external form, whereas subgenre indicates a sub-group within a kind distinguished by some common feature or features other than structure, such as subject. It has been argued that in terms of kind The Once and Future King is an extended prose fiction. The present study has been concerned with distinguishing the various subgenres at work in White's book. In conclusion I shall consider whether any of the genres identified has a dominant

position in the book, how the various genres work together, and what is the final effect of the generic combination.

The mainstream novel is the most influential subgenre at work in The Once and Future King. Two elements of its generic repertoire, characterization and narrative, are at the heart of the effectiveness of White's book. Character is vital to the mainstream novel, as is only natural with a genre developed in the eighteenth century, a period of growing individualism. Frye sees the presentation of character as one of the features distinguishing the mainstream novel from romance.¹ Conventionally a reader is informed not only about the words and actions of characters during the present tense of the novel, but also about their past history and possibly about their future as well. Such information may be given directly from the narrator to the reader, or more obliquely. The author's purpose is to engage the reader's interest in the character, although not necessarily his liking or approval. If a reader is not interested in a character then its existence has little purpose. The creation of character in a manner consistent with norms of the novel is a powerful indicator to a reader that a work is indeed a novel.

White placed a priority on the creation of character in his work. The characters in Malory were one of the features of the book that attracted him and prompted him to begin writing his Arthurian books:

¹ Frye, pp. 304-5.

The characters were real people with recognisable reactions which could be forecast. Mordred was hateful; Kay a decent chap with an inferiority complex; Gawaine that rarest of literary productions, a swine with a streak of solid decency. He was a sterling fellow to his own clan. Arthur, Lancelot and even Galahad were really glorious people -- not pre-raphaelite prigs.²

On the subject of his debt to Malory White wrote: "Almost all the people in this book are in his wonderful one, and have the same characters in both."³ White's admiration for Malory is made clear, both in The Once and Future King itself and his letters written during the period of its composition. Such a declaration about the characters in his book indicates that he felt them to be among its most important elements.

Seen purely in terms of character The Once and Future King reveals the conflicts between the aspirations and loyalties of a group of individuals. Arthur is motivated by a desire to bring peace to his country. Lancelot and Guenever support his aim, but their love brings about the destruction of peace. Their relationship is further complicated by Lancelot's need for spiritual fulfilment. Among the Orkney clan, Gareth is the most constant adherent to Arthur's aim, but he too struggles with the conflict between loyalty to his king and his family. Arthur is conscious of the dilemmas of those around him and tries to respect their feelings by giving love, even to those whom he knows are his

² White, in a letter to L.J. Potts dated 14th January 1938, in Letters to a Friend, p. 86.

³ White, notes on the dust jacket of The Once and Future King.

enemies. In presenting this complex and irreconcilable conflict of interests White reveals the motivation of each character in response to their situation. White's and the reader's sympathy is almost always with Arthur, but through the generosity of Arthur's character the reader is guided towards an understanding of the other figures.

The narrative tone of The Once and Future King is distinctive. The narrator is a controlling presence throughout the book, regulating the flow of the story, and commenting on the action. He is also willing to share with the reader his great stock of information about life in the Middle Ages. The didactic tone is set in "The Sword in the Stone" where it echoes the central relationship in the book, but it is maintained in a moderated way throughout the whole of The Once and Future King. In some respects the narrative style of The Once and Future King harks back to the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novel, when the narrator was more likely to address the reader directly than in recent periods. However, some authors now show a tendency to return to this style and emphasize that a story is being told. For example, Fay Weldon begins her most recent novel: "Reader, I am going to tell you the story of Clifford, Helen and little Nell."⁴ White's use of an intrusive narrator pre-dates the present interest in the device. It is a response to the subject matter rather than a desire to experiment with technique. Because White was retelling a familiar story he

⁴ Fay Weldon, The Hearts and Lives of Men (London: Heinemann, 1987), p. 1.

gives his narrator the rôle of story-teller and allows him to interject with information about the period and speculation about the feelings of characters. The narrator of The Once and Future King is developed into a distinctive character to whom the reader can respond. The impression created is of one who cares about the characters in his story and can persuade the reader to care too. The technique that White uses was not typical of the mainstream novel at the time when he was writing, but has been used to striking effect both before and since. However, White's use of the narrator to control the reader's response to the story is typical of the mainstream novel throughout its history.

These two major elements of The Once and Future King are characteristic of the mainstream novel. Their importance within White's book indicates that it has significant links with this subgenre. It is likely, given the dominance of the mainstream novel that many readers would approach White's books with the expectation that it will behave like one. Therefore the differences from the mainstream novel and similarities that it has to other subgenres assume a greater importance.

The two features of the historical novel exhibited by White's Arthurian books are drawn from opposite ends of its generic spectrum. On a small scale White's ability to present historical detail vividly is one of the most attractive features of the book. At the other end of the scale is the

presentation of the struggle towards peace and stability that took place in the Middle Ages and that takes place still. Between these two extremes, however, The Once and Future King lacks one important feature of the historical novel: it does not present a consistently realised portrait of a single period.

The historical detail concerning arms and armour, hunting, hawking, and architecture is presented by a narrator who is fascinated by all aspects of medieval life. The narrator conveys this enthusiasm to the reader so that the reader becomes part of the campaign to rescue the Middle Ages from the "impudence" of nineteenth-century attitudes. A picture is painted of a civilized and accomplished period. The fact that many of the achievements of the Middle Ages have since been superseded should not be allowed to obscure the fact of achievement. White will not allow our ancestors to be patronized. This kind of attitude, that historical periods and people are interesting for their own sakes, is fundamental to much more conventional historical novels than The Once and Future King.

The presentation of the historical process at work is a feature of many historical novels. In one respect White goes beyond the historical limits of his fiction and presents the constant struggle for peace and its continual undermining by human failure. Clearly, his concern with this issue was fuelled by the war in Europe while he was writing his

Arthurian books. In other ways, however, the search for peace has a specifically medieval context. Arthur's peace is achieved by the imposition of an order on society by an aristocracy who attempt to live by the ideals of chivalry. White did admire the ideals, although that did not stop his making fun of them. Even more, however, he admired the attempt to live up to them.

The historical novel shares many features with the mainstream novel. Therefore many of the comments made about The Once and Future King in the context of the mainstream novel apply equally to its historical counterpart. The absence of any concrete setting for most of the book is a feature that works against an understanding of it in terms of either of these genres. However, the lack of setting of the kind usually associated with the mainstream and historical novel frees White's books from too close a link to either of these genres and allows it to exhibit features of other genres without conflict.

The utopian element in The Once and Future King is closely linked with Arthur's character. The search for an "antidote for War" is the utopian ideal at the heart of the book for which Arthur constantly strives. His training by Merlyn had the one aim of fitting him to perform this search. Although The Once and Future King does not present a functioning utopia as do more conventional examples of the genre, it displays the same concerns with the way that power

is used in society. Perhaps the greatest idealist in The Once and Future King is not Arthur but Merlyn. It is Merlyn who initiates the search for the "antidote for War" in the knowledge, through his foresight, that it was bound to fail. The Once and Future King reaches the conclusion, therefore, that a failed attempt, especially one which can survive as an example, is better than no attempt at all. The certainty of this conclusion is marred by the futility and peevishness of the arguments in The Book of Merlyn. It seems inconsistent that the character who educated Arthur for the struggle in the knowledge that he must fail in his declared aim, while succeeding as an example, could take such a negative view of mankind as that displayed in The Book of Merlyn. Utopian fiction is a literature of exploration into how society could be better organized for the benefit of all its members. The Once and Future King with its search for the end of war, the most destructive feature of human society, is part of that literature.

Romance and fantasy have a localized effect in The Once and Future King, but they also have a pervasive influence throughout the book. Romance is concentrated mostly in "The Ill-Made Knight" in which Lancelot is the focus of attention as the ideal knight and as lover and beloved. Lancelot's story is taken directly from the Arthurian romance tradition as transmitted by Malory. However, the romance does influence the rest of the book as well. From the beginning in "The Sword in the Stone" the action is located in the kind

of golden age familiar from romance, where magic is commonplace and questing is a regular activity among the nobility. Thus certain romance elements form part of the background in "The Sword in the Stone" and supply in part the setting. In the mainstream novel setting is more or less realistic. In "The Sword in the Stone" and in The Once and Future King as a whole there is no substantial realistic background to the action. Instead there are a variety of physical and social elements, such as the forest, the castles, magic, and questing, all associated with romance rather than with more realistic fictions. It was noted that White's Arthurian books lack the kind of setting usually associated with the mainstream novel, but a setting of a different kind is supplied from the generic repertoire of romance.

Fantasy is similarly confined to part of the book. It is strongest in "The Sword in the Stone" where the Wart's adventures among the animals are among the most original elements in White's work. He is one of the few writers capable of convincing a reader that he can convey to them what it is like to be an animal. The animal transformations in "The Sword in the Stone" have the internal consistency demanded by Tolkien for the creation of a successful secondary world.⁵ Fantasy pervades the whole of The Once and Future King, however, because it plays such an important part in the development of Arthur's character and philosophy as a king, and because it figures so strongly in the portrayal of that

⁵ Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," p. 60.

golden age of childhood under the feudal system that Arthur tries to recreate for all his people.

The two generic elements that remain to be considered are the comic and tragic modes. As modes they are usually to be found working in combination with another subgenre. It is slightly more unusual to find comic and tragic modes so equally balanced as in The Once and Future King. I have argued that the tragedy stems from the story, which White took with very few changes from Malory, and that the comedy lies in the treatment of the story. The relationship between the two is, however, subtle. The comic mode creates the hopeful and positive atmosphere of the first two books of The Once and Future King. Without such a beginning to Arthur's kingship the loss and failure of his reign would be less tragic. The medieval idea of tragedy involved the downfall of a great man: in Arthur's case his failure is so much more affecting because he aimed so high.

The comments of an author about his own work are not always the most reliable guide. However, when White wrote about the search for "an antidote for War" he was not writing about The Once and Future King but about Le Morte Darthur. Nevertheless, the phrase describes perfectly the theme of his own book rather than Malory's. The various subgenres and modes at work in The Once and Future King combine to create a unique presentation of this theme. The fantasy, romance, and utopian elements of the book all work towards the creation of

an ideal society, like that of the Wart's childhood. The portrayal of the historical ideals of the Middle Ages, as expressed through chivalry, also works towards this ideal. The more realistic elements of the book, those that work within the genre of the mainstream novel, reveal why the ideal cannot be achieved. White creates realistic and fallible characters to people Arthur's world. Their fallibility is the reason for the failure of the ideal. The combination of the realistic and non-realistic genres, together with the comic and tragic modes is the ideal vehicle for presenting such a conflict.

The success of The Once and Future King is finally a contradiction. It seems like a contradiction that a book partaking of so many genres be truly unified. Nevertheless it is unified by Arthur's character, which remains idealistic and hopeful until the end. There is a second contradiction: that a book that tells the story of a life's work come to nothing can end hopefully. The hope, however, lies in the existence of the book itself. As long as the story is told of the pursuit of an ideal, then that pursuit is not in vain. White's originality in his retelling of Arthur's story makes him a worthy heir to a noble tradition.

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