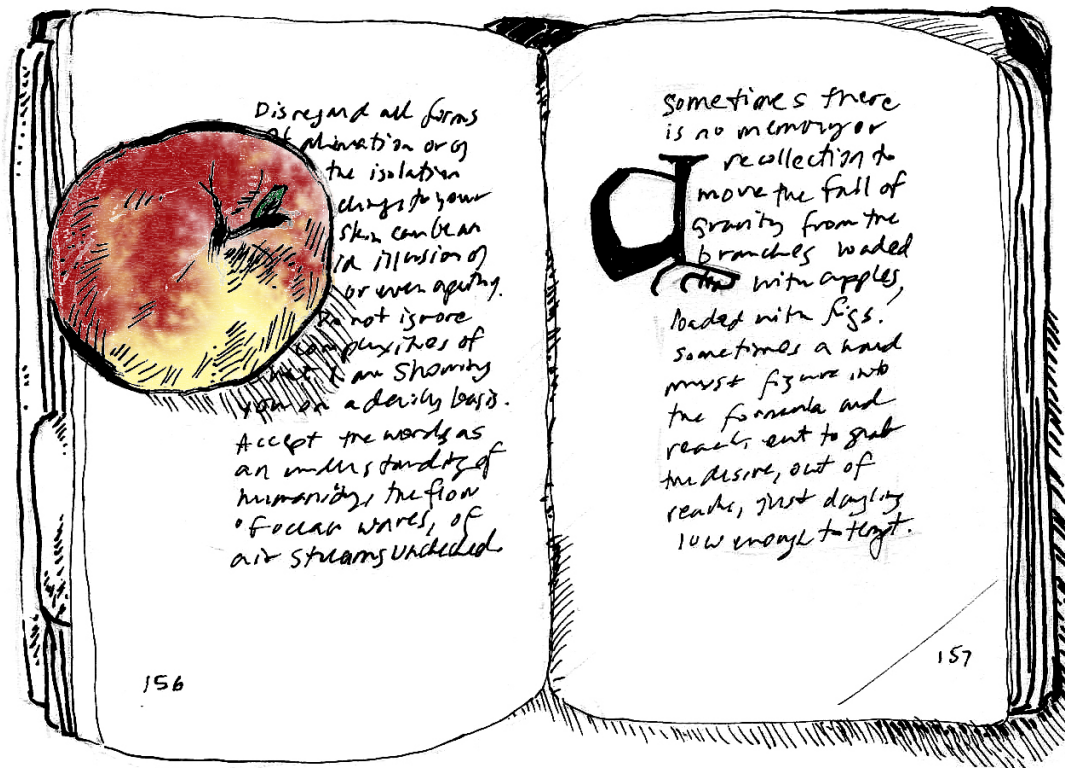# Tales of King Arthur

Arthurian Tales and Legends

The stories of King Arthur and his court serve multi-functions.

- show the cultural shift *before* the Norman Conquest (Eleventh Century) confirming values of the late Anglo-Saxon period

- promote a strong sense of identity for the average English citizen: national pride and a developing sense of an English-specific culture

- utilize identifiable characters who are presented situations and conflicts mirroring a set of heroic codes from an unidentified era in the early histories of England

- present on the surface universal themes of good versus evil

- although heavily indebted to Roman Catholic morals and imagery, the stories still utilize material from the folk-pagan concepts predating the catholic conversion during the Sixth Century with the actions of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Augustine   [*see page 10 of demo*]

Arthurian Tales and Legends

The first recorded stories come from the country of Wales.

In the collection of stories titled *The Mabinogion*, the beginnings of a cultural hero emerge.

- Begun as an oral tradition; it is speculated they were first conceived during the English Iron Age during Roman occupation of the island.

- It is also believed, by the Ninth Century, numerous different versions of the Arthurian legend were commonplace.

- In the Welsh folk tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, which was recorded within *The Mabinogion* during the Eleventh Century, King Arthur appears as a minor background character, a figure already established as a famous noble.
  - > However, he is shown as a King who unified all of Britain.
  - > In this sense, the character already has achieved notoriety from previous adventures.

Arthurian Tales and Legends

Within *The Mabinogion* text, five stories exist mentioning Arthur.

He does not appear as the central hero in any of these stories.

- In a sense, the character is being used more as a figure of digression and less as a pivotal personality.

- What this proves however is that as an image, Arthur was already well-conceived as a popular folk hero. Simply by using his name invoked a cultural expectation or nationalistic attitude, even at this early stage.

    > A similar,slightly more modern concept could be

    Sherlock Holmes

    Oliver Twist

    Mary Poppins

    Lady MacBeth

Arthurian Tales and Legends

Looking at these various stories collectively, they all fall into a general category.

Literature itself can be cataloged by *modes*.

- For example, there are five top concepts of determining themes in literature:

    > Realistic

    > Naturalistic

    > Existential

    > Romantic

    > Fantasy

Arthurian Tales and Legends

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  > Naturalistic

  > Existential

  > Romantic

  > Fantasy

} Depending on an author's intentions and emphasis, Arthurian tales may be placed in either of these last two categories.

Such labels are arbitrary and up for discussion or debate of course.
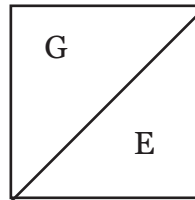
Literary Modes

Realistic mode: Equal balance of extremes between good and evil.

The world is full of both forces.

The world is controlled by both unseen forces at one time or another.

The goal of the work *expresses a want* to achieve the happy ending.
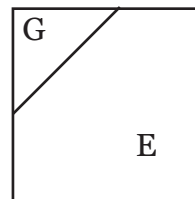
Keep in mind, the happiness is not always achieved in the story.

Naturalistic mode: Writer wants to expose evil, corruption.

Here the author shows evil existing in abundance.

The protagonist fights against extreme horror, suffering.

Literary Modes

Existential mode: The most complex mode of these five concepts:
the world is seen as a living hell for humans, a surreal nightmare; the human race is dehumanized by the modern world. The goal of the work *expresses a want* for the protagonist to see how a happy ending is possible; however, more than likely the protagonist cannot move outside of the self-induced rut of their environment. Such characters are displayed as anti-heros. At best the element of good might be reached if characters acknowledge their mistakes. However, oftentimes these flawed characters are overwhelmed by the prospect of change and refuse to transform themselves. The idea of 'good' therefore is a state not achievable—
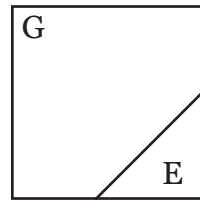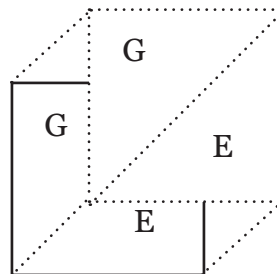it is an idealistic dream and nonexistent.

Most modern of the full list.

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Literary Modes

Romantic mode: You recognize the protagonist immediately. In this case the hero is ultimately good, patriotic, devoted. He/She will triumph even if it means dying for the cause. Some are shown in more realistic settings than others. The protagonist ultimately controls the environment. There exists an ultimate struggle between good and evil; however, there *will be* a happy ending.

Fantasy mode: Examples include surrealism, magic-realism, unreality, dream logic. Good and evil struggle against one another in terms similar to realistic models.

Literary Modes

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For the sake of clarity— in regards to the King Arthur Romances, it is best to consider this genre of stories as a combination of modes:

Romantic-Fantasy mode: You recognize the protagonist immediately. In this case the hero is ultimately good, patriotic, devoted. He/She will triumph even if it means dying for the cause. Some stories are shown in more realistic settings than others; in these cases, the themes are more geared towards a religious message. There exists an ultimate struggle between good and evil; however, there *will be* a happy ending. Elements of magic exist, mixing both Christian and pagan references in one text. Good and evil struggle against one another for full control.

Often in the King Arthur stories readers will discover a strong influence of Christian themes and elements; most common is the search for the Holy Grail. However, do not confuse this material with hagiographies from the same time period.

Hagiography

As discussed in previous classes— a hagiography became a genre onto itself in the early centuries of the Middle Ages.

- All major religions have generated these types of stories:
  Moslem, Christian, and Jewish faiths.
- Themes involve a spiritual epiphany moment for the protagonist and a journey undertaken to further aid in spiritual matters, either on a personal or national/global level.
- Specifically for Christian literature, these stories detail lives of particular saints and martyrs, display miracle tales to encourage the faithful, and discuss the findings of secular objects.
- More often these were written in the language of the Roman Church: Latin.
- However, like in the case of Geoffrey Chaucer, some were written in the common vernacular.
- During the Medieval era, an abundance of material was created within this religious-based genre.

Hagiography versus Romance-Fantasy

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Comparing these genres side by side— a better understanding of

their functions in Literature can be gained.

Hagiography— Lives of the Saints	*Arthurian Romance Fantasies*
• religious themes:	• political themes:
what makes a great saint?	*what makes a great king/knight?*
• protagonist has a stronger sense of morality, more than average person	• protagonists aims for a higher morality, despite obvious flaws
• passive and submissive personality	• passive/aggressive personality