

Brief analytical essay: the fall of the round table and english society



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What can the fall of the Round Table tell us about Malory's view of English society and politics in the 15th century? Malory views the nature of the knight's loyalties as destructive forces in themselves. Malory's version of the King Arthur legend differs greatly from previous entries. The tale of the Round Table is given a more gritty and realistic telling. There is betrayal, adultery, blood feuds, among many other violent events described in visceral detail. The characters are also driven by complex motivations. There is greed, lust and revenge. Friends fight friends, brothers kill brothers, and lovers kill lovers. It bears a foreboding atmosphere well-suited for the tragedies that occur within the tale. All of these themes reflect the woe that England experienced during the War of the Roses. The civil war between England's House of Lancaster and House of York marred the society and politics of 15th century England. It is a time of great uncertainty where loyalties are strained and betrayal is rife among lords in their desperate plays for power and prestige. The role of the knight in this chaotic period is also greatly challenged and redefined. Knights are forced to contradict their chivalric values by the turbulent political landscape as alliances are built and destroyed. The presence of these troubling events is reflected within Arthur's own court in Malory's works. In fact, Malory's tales could be described as an allegory for the War of the Roses itself. The Knights of the Round Table must face these same issues concerning loyalty in *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* and *The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon* with desolate results. The knightly virtues of loyalty to love, king, and knightly brotherhood become a source of great tension for the knights. Often the loyalties come into conflict with one another. In many ways the fall of the Round Table is used to make a commentary on the destructive force

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of the knight's loyalties during the War of the Roses. The loyalty to love is particularly disruptive to Lancelot in the *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*. In the book's first chapter, *Poisoned Apple*, Lancelot has just returned from the quest for the Holy Grail in this part of Malory's tales. After the many tribulations of that quest and the many near deaths, Lancelot makes it back to Arthur's castle. He realizes that his affair with Queen Guinevere held him back in his quest for the Holy Grail. "And if that I had nat had my prevy thoughtis to return to youre love as I do, I had sene as grete mysteryes as ever saw my sonne sir Galahad, Percivale, other sir Bors" (Malory, Book 1, Lines 36-39). Aggravayne and Mordred are of particular concern to Lancelot. He tells Queen Guinevere that he fears dishonor, shame, and punishment for her if they continue the affair. Of course Guinevere decides to kick him out of the court. Here Lancelot is forced to contradict his knightly values. Lancelot truly loves Guinevere and he is loyal to her but in this case, he is forced to leave Guinevere for the sake of his honor as well as Guinevere's honor. He must forsake loyalty to Guinevere to keep his loyalty to his own knighthood. As a result of this choice Lancelot compromises his position as a knight in King Arthur's court. Lancelot is the ideal knight in this tale. The greatest knight in the world and he still gets kicked out of the court. Lancelot's loyalty to the knightly code (and maybe fear of dishonor) and disloyalty to love loses him his spot on the Round Table. In previous tales, such as Chretien de Troyes *Knight of the Cart*, Lancelot chose to openly dishonor himself by riding in a cart because of his great love for Guinevere. Lancelot was completely guided by his love for Guinevere. Now, Lancelot possesses a different attitude, one driven towards preserving honor and the pursuit of further honor. Lancelot clearly mentions <https://assignbuster.com/brief-analytical-essay-the-fall-of-the-round-table-and-english-society/>

that had he not been so concerned with thinking of Guinevere, he could have succeeded in finding the Holy Grail. The tension between Lancelot in defending his love for Guinevere and Lancelot's defense of his own honor is an important contrast from earlier Arthurian tales where both love and honor are conjoined. The tension between loyalty to love and pursuit of honor is complicated in Malory's works to resemble real life. Not all quests for honor will gain love and love will not always gain prestige for the respective knight. Another example of tension in loyalty is the loyalty to king. This is one of the major virtues of the knight stretching back all the way to the beginning of the Arthurian legends. All knights are completely loyal to King Arthur. This idea changes significantly in Malory's tales. King Arthur is treated on a level equal to the knights. Of course The Round Table is supposed to be a place where there knights are equal to their king but in this tale the knights are able to charge crimes against Guinevere, King Arthur's wife, and King Arthur must go along. This is the case in Poisoned Apple. After banishing Lancelot, Queen Guinevere hosts a dinner for the Knights of the Round Table. At the dinner, one of the knights, Sir Pynell, decides to get revenge on Sir Gawain for the murder of Sir Lamerock. He pursues this goal by poisoning the fruit set up for Gawain. Patrice eats of the pieces of fruit and dies. As a result of this the whole Round Table blames Guinevere for his death. They also come to believe that Guinevere is trying to kill Gawain. Sir Mador, Sir Patrice's cousin, makes a case against Queen Guinevere and demands justice. Arthur doesn't absolve the charge, and he doesn't kill Mador however. He says that he would defend Guinevere but he must remain impartial as king and so grants Mador his case. It is a trial by battle and if Guinevere is unable to find a knight to fight for her, she will "brente" at the stake. King Arthur tells <https://assignbuster.com/brief-analytical-essay-the-fall-of-the-round-table-and-english-society/>

Guinevere to talk to Sir Bors when it is revealed that Sir Lancelot, the knight who would have fought for her, has been banished. Sir Bors is reluctant at first but concedes when King Arthur tells him to defend Guinevere. What is interesting about this exchange is that King Arthur has to point blank ask Sir Bors to defend his wife. This is different from previous entries. Knights would clamor to defend the Queen in earlier tales but now they act as if they wouldn't touch her with a ten foot pole. Indeed Sir Bors tells King Arthur that if he defends Queen Guinevere, his brother knights will be angry. At this point loyalty to knightly brotherhood directly takes precedent over any loyalty to the King. This situation illustrates how loyalty to brother knights would often contradict or supersede loyalty to King and Queen. The knights are all mad at Guinevere and hold her responsible for Patrise's death. They even go so far as to call her a "destroyer of good knights" (Malory, Book 1, lines 13-14). And yet none of the knights consider the possibility that the poisoning could be devised by one of their own. No one pays attention to the fact that the culprit might be the knight whose brother was slain by Gawain. It doesn't even cross their minds. This is important to 15th century society because of how the kingship has become corrupted. The country is divided into warring factions, it makes sense that knights would start to distrust royalty and question that loyalty. Knights are forced to take a side that could lead to their execution. So the conflicted loyalty in "Poisoned Apple" makes plenty of sense. Loyalty to one's knightly brother is also a great cause for tensions in Malory's King Arthur. In the "Poisoned Apple", the idea of knightly brotherhood almost brings about Queen Guinevere's death. The poisoning of Sir Patrise is blamed upon Queen Guinevere completely by the Knights of the Round Table. They alienate her and none are willing to defend

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her against Sir Mador's charge. When Sir Bors meets with the other knights, they are angry with him that he would consider defending Queen Guinevere. Even after explaining the situation and defending her as a "maintainer of good knights", there are still knights who are angry with the idea. This is consistent in 15th century society because knights have devolved into roving bands of mercenaries and indeed the only people they can trust and remain truly loyal to is each other. There was no telling which alliance they would need to join. It was a part of self-preservation. But even their loyalty to each other is tested in the Malory tales. Many Knights of the Round Table bear grudges against one another as the case was with Pynell plot to kill Gawain with poisoned fruit. While the tale of King Arthur commonly depicts the strong bonds of loyalty to brotherhood, lordship and love, Malory puts these ideas in opposition during the fall of the Round Table. Why does he do so? It illustrates disillusionment with the ideals represented by the Arthurian legends. The War of the Roses strained everyone's loyalty and in many cases the loyalties prove destructive to the knight. Loyalty to one's love made the knight weak and made them a target. The knight's loyalty to their king or lord was regarded with anxiety because one never knew whether they would be betrayed by their lord. Even the solace of knightly brotherhood is sullied by common betrayal. The fall of the Round Table represents a wakeup call to England. The message is that loyalty is fleeting. Works Cited Luminarium. 18 May 2010. Web. 4 November 2012. Malory, Sir Thomas. Complete Works. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Print.