



Lesson Plans: Grades 6-8

Sourced by State Standards

Tales of King Arthur

Introduction



Arthur Draws the Sword from the Stone

Credit: Courtesy of the University of Idaho's "The Quest: An Arthurian Resource".

Lightly he grasped the handle of the sword with one hand, and it came forth straightway! Then, glad that his brother should not be without a sword, he swiftly gat upon his horse and rode on, and delivered the sword to Sir Kay, and thought no more of aught but the splendid knights and richly garbed lords that were at the jousts.

—From *King Arthur's Knights* by Henry Gilbert.

The stories of King Arthur and his Court have entertained young and old alike for over a thousand years. In this lesson, students will discover how historical events gradually merged with fantasy to create the colorful tales we enjoy today. They will read some of the more familiar stories, learn about the code of chivalry of the Round Table, ponder the symbolism of the Holy Grail, and then choose a favorite Arthurian character for a bit of role-playing.

Guiding Questions

Who was King Arthur and how did his legend evolve?

What were the ideals of the knights of the Round Table?

Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to

Describe King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table

Explain the historic and the mythical aspects of the Arthurian legend

Discuss the rules of chivalry honored by Arthur's knights

Relate several familiar tales associated with King Arthur

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/tales-king-arthur>

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Explain the significance of the quest for the Holy Grail

Background

The figure of King Arthur was probably based upon a Celtic king or **chieftain** who lived in southwestern England during the 6th century, and led his warriors against invading armies of **Saxons**. This fearless leader was famous in his own time, and over the centuries his legend grew as storytellers awed their audiences with tales of his **exploits**. His name first appears in a long Welsh poem of the 7th century, *Y Goddodin*. He is referred to by the **Welsh** chronicler Nennius in the 9th century and figures prominently in British **historical annals** of the 10th century. In 1138 Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote the "**semi-historical**" *History of the Kings of Britain*, devoting half of his work to the exploits of Arthur. Blending and embellishing many strands of the oral tradition, then setting the action in his own times, he forged the first Arthurian novel. Manuscripts were translated from Latin into the **Anglo-Saxon** tongue and Norman French and widely distributed throughout Britain. It became the bestseller of its time.

At the end of the 12th century, French poet Chretien de Troyes further embellished the legend, adding new tales of **chivalrous** knights as well as the tragic romance of Lancelot and Guinevere. A decade later, Robert de Borron reintroduced the theme of the **grail** (drawing upon early **Celtic folklore**) and gave prominence to the **magician, Merlin**. By now, the stories had taken on greater **Christian overtones**, although certain **pagan elements** remained. King Arthur had come to **embody** the ideal Christian knight. In the 15th century, Sir Thomas Malory reworked the somewhat unwieldy collection of tales into a long unified epic entitled *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Written in a lyrical English prose (rather than Latin), it was an instant hit. Malory's work became the **definitive version** of the story of King Arthur. Of course, by now the Celtic hero of centuries past had been lost in the long series of transformations.

In more recent times, Victorian poet Lord Tennyson repopularized the Arthurian legend in his long poetic work, *Idylls of the King*, and in the early 20th century T. H. White created his well-loved, **whimsical adaptation**, *The Once and Future King*. Arthur and his court of chivalrous knights are alive and well in the 21st century—gracing the stage in productions of Lerner and Loewe's musical ***Camelot***, appearing on the wide screen in films like ***Excalibur***, ***First Knight***, and ***Merlin***, and waiting to be rediscovered by new generations of readers in books about their fabulous adventures.

Preparation Instructions

Review the activities of the lesson plan. Locate and bookmark suggested materials and websites. Download the reading passages cited in Activities 2, 4, 5, and 6 and mark the places where students are to begin and end reading aloud. Download and duplicate the charts provided in pdf format in Activities 2, 6, and 7 and the Venn Diagram in Activity 5.

Additional background information can be found at the following links available through EDSITEment-reviewed resource Labyrinth:

Arthur FAQ at the Camelot Project

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/tales-king-arthur>

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King Arthur—The Geography

Background for the Holy Grail at the Camelot Project

Gather together a collection of books about the Middle Ages and stories about King Arthur from your school library. These will be useful for providing additional illustrations of the material covered in the lesson as well background information. (For recommended books on King Arthur, see Extending the Lesson.)

Lesson Activities

Activity 1. Setting the Stage

Activity 2. The Sword in the Stone

Activity 3. The Chivalrous Knights of the Round Table

Activity 4. Excalibur

Activity 5. The Holy Grail

Activity 6. Sailing to Avalon

Activity 1. Setting the Stage

Begin the lesson by asking who has heard of King Arthur. Discuss with students to determine how much they know about him and what sources—movies, books, and so on—inform their ideas. Then ask whether they think King Arthur was a real person. (Most people believe he was mythical.) Explain that the stories about Arthur are based upon the exploits of a chieftain who really lived many centuries ago. Discuss the background material provided at the beginning of this lesson plan, stressing how the stories evolved and changed over the years. You might want to create a timeline on the board to help the students better understand the chronology. Indicate the period of the Middle Ages (from the 5th century to the 15th), and then point out when the “real” Arthur lived and when the major versions of the legend appeared.

Next, locate the geographical setting of the stories. Access the map of Europe available through Labyrinth and locate southwestern England. Explain that this is where the battles were fought between the Celts and the Saxons in the 6th century. Now go to Anglo-Saxon England in 10th century also available through Labyrinth. Find Winchester and Glastonbury. These cities are closely connected with the legend of King Arthur. Note how closely southern England lies to France. This is where the Saxons crossed the Channel to invade England during the Dark Ages. (William the Conqueror took the same route in 1066!) The proximity of the two countries also encouraged the spread of the tales from Britain to France.

Now that the students have a general idea of the setting behind the evolution of the tales of King Arthur and where they took place, tell them they will be reading and sharing opinions about some of the more famous episodes.

Activity 2. The Sword in the Stone

In this activity, the students will read together a passage describing how Arthur became king taken from *King Arthur's Knights* by Henry Gilbert. Like many tales derived from folklore, the stories of King Arthur are a blend of history and fantasy. As the students read this passage, they should think about which aspects seem realistic and which are more fanciful or unrealistic.

Access Gilbert's King Arthurs Knights Chapter 1 available through Internet Public Library. Gilbert's book, published in 1911, was intended to offer a more “kid-friendly” version of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. It is indeed a gripping, beautifully written version of the legend, but because the style and vocabulary can present a challenge for modern students, you might consider having passages read aloud as a group under your guidance. If you do so, consider pausing after each paragraph or two to discuss specific images, characters, or events. You should write any difficult words on the board and explain their meanings.

Begin by calling upon a student or students to read aloud up to the paragraph that begins “As it neared the feast of Christmas.” Remind the class that the Saxons were tribesmen who invaded England in the 6th century (when the “real” King Arthur lived). Point out that “pagans” were non-Christians. (You might use this word to begin your vocabulary list on the board.) After this section has been read, ask for a volunteer to explain the meaning of the red and white dragons.

Select students to continue reading the text, ending at the paragraph that begins “So that the kings and lords should be kept together...” Then ask what event in this passage seems most unrealistic or fanciful. (The sudden appearance of the sword in the stone.) Doesn't this add a measure of suspense that makes one want to read further?

Read together the rest of the passage. Then ask the students their opinion of the character of Sir Kay. What causes him to confess that he has lied. (Remember the influence of the Christian church in the stories.) Once he realizes he is King, what promise does Arthur make to Sir Kay? What does this tell about Arthur's character? View an illustration of this famous scene by accessing Arthur Draws the Sword from the Stone available through Labyrinth.

Next, arrange the students in groups. Hand out a copy of the chart *History/Fantasy in the Tales of King Arthur* available in pdf format to each group. Instruct the students to discuss in their groups the story they have just read. They should select four elements of the story that seem realistic and note these in the first column of their chart. Then they should consider elements that seem unreal, magical, or mythical, noting them down in the second column of the chart. After all the charts have been completed, call upon a volunteer from each group to describe realistic and one fanciful element appearing on the group chart. Ask students to discuss what effect including fantastic elements has on the story. How does it both add to and detract from Arthur's legitimacy as king? What is the general effect of mixing realistic and non-realistic elements?

Activity 3. The Chivalrous Knights of the Round Table

By reading a selection from Gilbert's King Arthur's Knights Chapter 2, students will learn how Arthur, once he became king, Arthur led an army of knights and defeated the Saxons, expanded his kingdom, and brought

about a peace that lasted for 12 years. He also took a wife—Guinevere—and established his court at his castle at Camelot. As a wedding gift from his father-in-law he was presented with a large, round table. It was a magical table that could expand to accommodate fifty, one hundred, or even one hundred and fifty knights. Whenever a new knight joined Arthur's court, his name appeared on the back of one of the seats at the table.

Have students read from King Arthur's Knights Chapter 2 until the following paragraph (either in class, or at home):

Both the knights and the common people shouted with joy, and acclaimed Sir Lancelot as a noble and mighty knight. But the young man was full modest, and withdrew from the press. King Arthur gave to him the Dolorous Tower and the lands which had belonged to Sir Caradoc, and Lancelot caused the old dame and her sons to be given a fair piece of land and a hut, and many other wrongs and evil customs that had been done by Sir Caradoc, Sir Lancelot caused to be righted.

Ask students, what is the advantage of having a meeting at a round table rather than a rectangular one.

Students might point out that all persons are seated in an equal manner at a round table. If the table is rectangular, the leader or leaders are usually seated at one end, a dominant position. Round tables are far more democratic! Explain that Celtic warriors often met in circles to avoid fighting over who was superior to whom, so here is another element of the legend that is based on fact. They can see illustrations of Arthur's Round Table by accessing the following images available through Labyrinth: "Sir Galahad Is Brought to the Court of King Arthur", as well as the Round Table of King Arthur on the wall of the Great Hall of Winchester Castle. The table was constructed in the 13th century (long after the time the legendary Arthur was supposed to live) and still hangs in the castle. At the second site, scroll down and view the second image in the left margin. As you can see, the Round Table was used for banquets and feasts as well as official meetings.

At the end of the 12th century, Chretien de Troyes introduced the notion of chivalry into the Arthurian legend. From his time onward, every knight of the Round Table was expected to adhere to the rules of a strict code of honorable behavior. Have students reread Gilbert's preface in which he recounts a version of the chivalric code: *"The duties of a "good and faithful knight" were quite simple, but they were often very hard to perform. They were: to protect the distressed, to speak the truth, to keep his word to all, to be courteous and gentle to women, to defend right against might, and to do or say nothing that should sully the fair name of Christian knighthood."*

Discuss the following questions with the class:

Why is it necessary to have rules such as these, even if they are not always followed to the letter?

Which rules might be most difficult to follow? Why?

What rules of good conduct govern groups of people in modern life? Who are they similar to or dissimilar from chivalric codes?

What does the story of Lancelot teach about the importance of chivalric codes? How does Lancelot's behavior adhere to the code? How does he compare to Sir Caradoc?

Activity 4. Excalibur

Arthur's famous sword, Excalibur, was first mentioned in the 11th century Welsh prose romance *Culhwch and Owen*. Explain to the students that while "the sword in the stone" helped make Arthur king, another sword, Excalibur, became his favorite weapon. How he obtained this sword is among the most famous episodes of the Arthurian legend. It is retold in Bulfinch's *Mythology* accessible through Labyrinth at Bulfinch's *Mythology*. Age of Chivalry Chapter III Part III. Scroll down to the section entitled "King Arthur Gets a Sword from the Lady of the Lake." Then call upon students to read the passage aloud. Because the language is somewhat "old-fashioned," caution them to read slowly. The word "churl" used in the first sentence means "peasant." (In medieval times a churl was a freeman of the lowest rank.) The word "recreant" in the 18th line means "cowardly" or "untrue." Add these to the vocabulary list on the board you started with Activity 2.

Once the passage has been read, call upon students to retell the main events in their own words. An illustration of this scene can be viewed at *The Return of Arthur* available through Labyrinth. The knight put to sleep by Merlin is Pellinore; in later episodes he will actually join the fellowship of the Round Table. Pellinore is also the father of Perceval, whom we'll be meeting later in this lesson. Although Excalibur is a beautiful sword, it is the scabbard that has magical powers -- as long as Arthur is wearing it, he will never lose a drop of blood in battle.

Ask the students for their reactions to this passage. Although magic plays a major role in the scene at the lake, is the scene believable? Arthur agrees to give the Lady of the Lake whatever she asks in the future in exchange for the sword. Is this wise? What new element does this promise add to the unfolding drama? (Mystery? Suspense?)

Remind the students of the code of chivalry discussed in Activity 3. Ask them to consider in what ways Arthur has followed the code in this passage. Have each student make a list of examples. Then have the members of the class share their ideas.

Activity 5. The Holy Grail

One of the most familiar themes of the Arthurian legend is the quest for the Holy Grail. Actually, in the earliest versions of the story the grail is not the wine chalice most people think of. In Celtic folklore, the magical vessel is a pearl-rimmed cauldron -- a provider of plenty and a source of prophecy. (Celtic cauldrons were used in ceremonial feasting in very ancient times.) A later version of the story refers to a stone, which provides food and drink and prevents anyone who sees it from dying within the week. Chretien de Troyes describes a flat dish brought to the table during various courses of a meal. This is a grail, a word derived from the Latin word *gradale* (a dish brought to the table). (The word "grail" was used in most texts until fairly recently, when it was replaced by "grail.")

Chretien's tale (*Le Conte del Graal*) is the oldest story in which one of Arthur's knights (Perceval) encounters a magical grail. Perceval is described as a rather slow-witted (but brave and well-meaning) fellow. (His character is based upon Peredur, a naive "country bumpkin" appearing in an early Celtic tale.) Soon after Perceval is knighted, he is given some rather bad advice; he is told that it is his rule to ask questions about something he doesn't understand. Under these conditions Perceval encounters the grail. Read the following passage aloud:

The young knight, Perceval, has been riding through the woods and suddenly enters a desolate wasteland. Continuing on, he comes upon a large castle, which is guarded and inhabited by an order of knights and ruled by the Fisher King. The king, who has been wounded in the thigh and is dying, invites Perceval to dine with him. The meal begins with a strange procession: it is led by a young man carrying a lance dipping with blood, followed by two squires with golden candelabra and a beautiful woman carrying a silver graal set with precious jewels. The woman places the graal on the table, and it supplies food for the full company of knights. Perceval is most intrigued about what is going on around him, yet mindful of being told not to ask unneeded questions, so he holds his tongue. After the meal, he falls asleep. When he awakes, he is lying in the woods. The castle has disappeared.

For many years, Perceval searches for the mysterious castle. He later discovers that the Fisher King is his uncle and that had he only asked about the function of the graal, the old king would have been healed and the wasteland surrounding his castle would have been transformed into a green and fertile countryside.

(Chretien died before completing this story. Some scholars believe that he intended to have Perceval return to the castle and ask about the graal. But, of course, we'll never know for sure.)

Ask the students for their reactions to this story. How do they feel about Perceval's simple character? What is the moral of the story? What might the graal symbolize?

About 10 years after the death of Chretien de Troyes, French poet Robert de Boron redefined the graal as a chalice—the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper and which was later used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch His blood as He was taken down from the cross. This Holy Graal was supposedly brought by Joseph to Glastonbury in Britain. (This city is indicated on the second map accessed in Activity 1.) The vessel now took on a Christian meaning, and the quest for the holy chalice became the highest spiritual pursuit a knight could undertake.

In Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Sir Bors is the first of the knights of the Round Table to see the graal. Read Henry Gilbert's version of his adventure by accessing Gilbert's King Arthur's Knights Chapter 9 through Internet Public Library. Scroll down to paragraph beginning "It chanced that seven nights before..." Tell the students to look for similarities with the earlier tale about Perceval as this story is read aloud. (These include the setting of a castle in a desolate region, the appearance of a strange weapon—in the first tale it was a bleeding sword, in this one it is a flaming spear—and, of course, the appearance of a magical, health-restoring vessel.) A painting of the graal by Dante Rossetti can be seen at Attainment of the Sanc Grael available through Labyrinth.

Discuss the similarities and differences between the two stories of the graal—Perceval and the Fisher King and Sir Bors at the "haunted" castle. How affective are the "thriller" elements of the second tale - the empty armor, the ferocious boar rushing out of the dungeon, the food set out to tempt Sir Bors? Ask the students who the old man might be. (Could he be the Fisher King?) What is the symbolism of the graal? Point out the religious emphasis in this story. In a later story in Malory's work Sir Bors, Sir Galahad, and Sir Perceval (a new, more sophisticated knight than the simpleton you first read about) find the graal in the hands of the spirit of Joseph of Arimathea himself. The spirit tells them that no one will ever see the graal again: because there is too much evil in England, it will disappear, and Arthur's kingdom will be torn apart by warfare.

Conclude this activity by handing out copies of the Venn diagram available in .pdf format (also available as an online interactive). Divide the class into groups. Instruct the groups to discuss the two stories of the graal—Perceval and the Fisher King and the adventure of Sir Bors. Then each group should fill in the diagram, indicating the similarities and differences between the two tales.

Activity 6. Sailing to Avalon

After many years of peace, Arthur's kingdom did indeed erupt into a state of war. Sir Lancelot proved an unworthy friend, and he was driven from Camelot. He returned to his homeland, France. Arthur decided to pursue him there, leaving the kingdom in the hands of his nephew, Mordred. But Mordred was an evil fellow, and he soon claimed the crown for himself. Arthur was summoned home by Guinevere. He battled and slew Mordred, but he was mortally wounded himself.

Read together Henry Gilbert's telling of the end of the legend by accessing The Death of Arthur available through Internet Public Library. Select students to read the passage aloud up to the paragraph that begins "When morning broke. . . ." Then view the following images available through Labyrinth: Sir Bedivere Casts the Sword Excalibur into the Lake. Call upon students to describe what is happening in the scene.

Ask the students if they remember Arthur's promise to the Lady of the Lake (described in the passage in Activity 3). (In exchange for the use of Excalibur, Arthur swore to do whatever she asked of him in the future.) What she later asked was that he return the sword to her before he died.

According to Celtic folklore, Arthur was carried away to the island of Blessed Souls to be healed of his wounds. In Malory's version of the story, he was taken to the island of Avalon (for this same purpose). He never returned to Camelot, but it was said that one day he would return to recover and rule his kingdom.

Review the main characters and events of the five episodes studied in Activities 2-6 of this lesson plan. Then instruct the students, working in five groups, to fill in the chart (Tales of King Arthur) available in .pdf format. Then call upon a volunteer in each group to discuss one of the stories, following the data noted on the chart, until all five stories have been presented. Conclude the activity by asking which story/stories the students enjoyed the most—and why.

Assessment

By now the students have met many characters from the legend of King Arthur. Lead a discussion about these characters, noting their strengths and weaknesses. Ask the students to choose a favorite and to tell what they like best about this character. Write down the names of the characters on the board as they are mentioned. Now explain that there were many other colorful characters appearing in the many tales that make up the Arthurian legend. Tell the students they can find out more about these characters by researching both online and in the library. They are to choose one character, research him or her, and then fill out the form available in pdf format.

The students should choose from among this list of characters: King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, Sir Gawain, Sir Perceval, Morgan Le Fay, Queen Guinevere, Merlin, Mordred, Sir Bors, Sir Galahad, Sir Pellinor, the Fisher King, Sir Bedivere, and the Lady of the Lake.

Circulate among the students as they are working to make sure that there is a wide distribution of characters chosen. (Not everyone can be Arthur or Guinevere!) When all the charts have been filled out, instruct the students to assume the role of their favorite character. One at a time, they will then answer questions posed by classmates until their identity has been guessed. This activity can be done with the class as a whole or in smaller groups.

Extending The Lesson

Continue the study of King Arthur by selecting chapters from the following book to read aloud to the class: T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*; Rosemary Sutcliffe's *The Sword at Sunset*; or Mary Stewart's *The Merlin Trilogy*. The following books are recommended for independent reading: *Seeing Stone* by Kevin Holland-Crossley; *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* by Roger Lancelyn Green, and *Tales of King Arthur* by Felicity Brooks.

Selected EDSITEment Websites

The Labyrinth

Anglo-Saxon England in 10th century

Bulfinch's Mythology

Bulfinch's Mythology, Age of Chivalry Chapter III Part III

Internet Public Library

Gordd Cymru's Online Arthurian Archives

Gilbert's King Arthurs Knights Chapter 1

Gilbert's King Arthur's Knights Chapter 9

The Death of Arthur

Attainment of the Sanc Grael

Le Morte d'Arthur

Europe

King Arthur -- The Geography

King Arthur: A Man for the Ages -- The Things

Chivalry

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/tales-king-arthur>

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The Holy Grail

King Arthur: The People of the Legends

The Places of the Legends

Meet the Characters

Arthur and the Arthurian legend

The Quest: An Arthurian Resource

An Archaeological Quest for the "real" King Arthur

Chretien de Troyes's Le Conte del Graal

Arthurian Sites in England

Gallery

Arthur Draws the Sword from the Stone

"Sir Galahad Is Brought to the Court of King Arthur"

The Return of Arthur

Sir Bedivere Casts the Sword Excalbur into the Lake

Time Required

7-9 class periods

Subject Areas

- Art and Culture > Subject Matter > Anthropology
- History and Social Studies > Place > Europe
- Literature and Language Arts > Place > British
- Art and Culture > Subject Matter > Folklore
- Literature and Language Arts > Genre > Fables, Fairy tales and Folklore

Skills

- Critical analysis

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- Critical thinking
- Discussion
- Gathering, classifying and interpreting written, oral and visual information
- Literary analysis
- Making inferences and drawing conclusions
- Representing ideas and information orally, graphically and in writing
- Role-playing/Performance

Authors

- Suzanne Art (AL)

Activity Worksheets

Tales of King Arthur: Worksheet 1 - History/Fantasy Chart

Tales of King Arthur: Worksheet 2 - The Quest for the Holy Grail Venn Diagram

Tales of King Arthur: Worksheet 3 - Tales of King Arthur

Tales of King Arthur: Worksheet 4 - Character Form for Role Playing

Student Resources

Tales of King Arthur

Media



Arthur Draws the Sword from the Stone

Credit: Courtesy of the University of Idaho's "The Quest: An Arthurian Resource".