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Idylls of the King

Alfred, Lord Tennyson · *1859–1885 · original English text*

Tennyson's twelve linked poems retell the rise and fall of King Arthur and the Round Table, from his coming to the throne to his passing to Avilion. Each idyll is a self-contained story, and together they trace the slow decay of an ideal kingdom through sin, doubt, and betrayal. The library hosts the twelve idylls with Tennyson's dedication and his closing address to the Queen.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a great ideal be kept alive among human beings who fail it, and what is left when the kingdom falls?

Tennyson's answer is both sad and hopeful. Arthur founds an order of knights to serve justice and purity, and the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, the lies of Vivien, and the failure of the Grail quest slowly eat away at it. In the end, Arthur is wounded and carried away, and the poem leaves the possibility of his return. The idylls are Victorian in their moral concern, and they ask the reader to feel both the beauty of the ideal and the cost of losing it.

KEY CHARACTERS

King Arthur
The founder of the Round Table, a model of the ideal.

Guinevere
The queen, whose love for Lancelot shakes the court.

Lancelot
The greatest knight, divided between loyalty and love.

Merlin
The wise man, trapped by Vivien.

Vivien
A court schemer who destroys Merlin.

Elaine
The lily maid of Astolat.

Gareth
A young knight who begins as a kitchen boy.

Bedivere
The last knight, who returns Excalibur.

Grades 8–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Coming of Arthur and Gareth
THE COMING OF ARTHUR; GARETH AND LYNETTE

Arthur is made king amid doubts about his birth and weds Guinevere, founding the Round Table. In the second idyll a kitchen boy, Gareth, wins his knighthood.

- Arthur's vows are the founding of the ideal.
- Gareth's service in the kitchen is a test of humility.
- The tone of both idylls is bright and early.

02
Geraint and Enid
THE MARRIAGE OF GERAINT; GERAINT AND ENID

Geraint marries Enid, then withdraws from his duties in love and, hearing a rumor of her, tests her cruelly on a journey.

- Geraint misreads something Enid says, and the test follows.
- Enid's patience is tried.
- The couple are reconciled at last.

03
Balin, Merlin, and Vivien
BALIN AND BALAN; MERLIN AND VIVIEN

Two brothers die in a tragic mistake after Balin has been shaken by seeing Lancelot and Guinevere together. Vivien, a court schemer, charms Merlin and uses his own spell on him.

- Balin's anger is a sign of the court's unease.
- The first notes of scandal are heard.
- Merlin falls through his own folly.

04
Lancelot, Elaine, and the Grail
LANCELOT AND ELAINE; THE HOLY GRAIL

Elaine of Astolat loves Lancelot and dies of it. The knights set out on the quest for the Holy Grail, and few return.

- Elaine's funeral barge is a famous image.
- Lancelot's divided heart is the center of the court's secret.
- The Grail quest empties the Table and does not reunite it.

05
Pelleas and the Last Tournament
PELLEAS AND ETTARRE; THE LAST TOURNAMENT

Pelleas, a young and trusting knight, is betrayed by Ettarre and by his friend Gawain. In the Last Tournament the knights show the decay of their ideal.

- Pelleas's loss of faith is a loss of the whole ideal.
- The Red Knight is a challenge to Arthur's order.
- The tournament is a hollow sport.

06
Guinevere and the Passing
GUINEVERE; THE PASSING OF ARTHUR

Guinevere flees to the convent at Almesbury, where Arthur forgives her and leaves. In the last battle Arthur is wounded, Bedivere returns Excalibur to the lake, and a barge carries the king away.

- Arthur's farewell to Guinevere is the emotional center.
- Bedivere hesitates before throwing the sword.
- The barge takes Arthur toward Avilion.

The Ideal · Betrayal · Love and Loyalty · The Quest · Passing

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 8–12

1. Each idyll can be read alone. Notice what each adds to the larger decline.
2. Tennyson's Arthur is a Victorian moral figure. Compare him with older versions.
3. The weather and seasons move through the poems. Notice how the year turns.
4. The closing dedication and address are part of the book. Ask why Tennyson includes them.

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