

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Sword in the Stone by T.H. White

## Book Information

T.H. White, The Sword in the Stone  
Quiz Number: 20230  
Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1963  
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288 Pages  
Book Level: 7.5  
Interest Level: MG

Humor, fantasy, and satire are evident in the adventures of the Wart, the medieval boy who becomes King Arthur.

**Topics:** Classics, Classics (All);  
Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other;  
Humor/Funny, Funny

## Main Characters

Archimedes Merlyn's owl

Cavall Wart's favorite dog

Cully the goshawk Kay and the Wart use for hunting

Dog Boy the keeper of Sir Ector's hunting dogs; his nose is bitten off by Wat

Friar Tuck one of Robin's friends who is imprisoned by Queen Morgan the Fay

Hob the keeper of Sir Ector's hunting birds

Kay Sir Ector's son, who at first tries to take credit for pulling the sword from the stone

King Pellinore a bumbling man who has devoted his life to chasing the Questing Beast

Madame Mim a witch who imprisons Kay and Wart and plans to eat them

Merlyn Wart's magical tutor, who lives his life backwards

Queen Morgan the Fay the woman who imprisons Friar Tuck, Wat, and the Dog Boy in her castle

Robin Wood a woodsman and outlaw often mistakenly called Robin Hood; he helps Wart retrieve his friends at Queen Morgan the Fay's castle

Sir Ector Wart's adoptive father

Sir Grummore Grummursum a close friend of Sir Ector and the man who jousts with King Pellinore

the Questing Beast the beast that King Pellinore chases throughout his life

the Wart the protagonist of the story, a young boy who eventually becomes King Arthur of England by pulling a sword from a stone

Wat the local outcast who lives in the forest after biting off the Dog Boy's nose

## Vocabulary

**anachronism** something out of its proper time

**astrolabe** a medieval instrument that was used to determine the altitude of the sun or other celestial objects

**austringer** a bird handler

**hooligan** a wild, destructive youth

**port** a rich, sweet, fortified wine

**quest** an expedition or search

## Synopsis

*The Sword in the Stone* is a story about the boyhood of the legendary King Arthur. Arthur, known throughout this story as the Wart, is tutored by Merlyn, a magician who lives his life backwards; that is, Merlyn gets younger instead of older. The Wart lives with Sir Ector and his son, Kay, in The Castle of the Forest Sauvage. Since the Wart is not Sir Ector's biological son, the Wart understands that Kay must always take precedence. Kay and the Wart are good friends, though Kay has a tendency to be self-centered.

Merlyn begins tutoring the Wart with a lesson concerning fish. He turns him into a perch, and the two begin to explore the moat. Merlyn explains that the Wart should be wary of his surroundings, and he brings the Wart to meet Mr. M., the King of the Moat. The King of the Moat explains that there is nothing except power -- power of the mind and the body and, therefore, "Might is right." When Mr. M. finishes his explanation, he warns the Wart to leave right away before he eats him. The Wart escapes, and Merlyn transports them both back to the drawbridge and into their human forms.

On another afternoon, Kay and the Wart decide to

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hunt for rabbits. Eventually, they come upon a cottage that belongs to Madame Mim. Madame Mim turns out to be a witch who captures the boys in order to prepare them for her meal. She then places the boys in cages having magical locks. A black goat that knows the magic words necessary to open the locks resides in the cage next to the Wart and, in a whispered conversation, the Wart and the goat devise a plan to send the goat for Merlyn's help. When Merlyn appears, he and Madame Mim take part in a wizard's duel in which they try to outwit each other by changing themselves into various animals. In fierce combat, Merlyn finally transforms himself into microbes and infects the witch and her crow with a fatal illness.

One day, the Wart asks to watch a jousting tournament. Although Merlyn believes jousting is a rather useless activity, especially in comparison to educating the mind, he relents and arranges a tournament between King Pellinore, a bumbling older man whom the Wart had previously met in the forest, and Sir Grummore Grummursum, a close friend of Sir Ector. The two men engage in a lengthy battle that ends with them knocking themselves unconscious.

The Wart has many adventures under Merlyn's instruction. He is turned into a bird to learn about bird life but barely escapes with his life. The Wart and Kay also meet the infamous Robin Hood and help him rescue their friends from captivity in Queen Morgan the Fay's castle. When the boys complete their task, Robin offers them a reward, and the Wart asks to take Wat, a local outcast, to Merlyn. The Wart explains that he wants Merlyn to restore Wat to his senses. Wat agrees to come with the Wart, and Merlyn heals him. Wat even gains acceptance when he becomes close friends with the Dog Boy, the caretaker of Sir Ector's hunting dogs.

Soon, autumn comes to the Forest Sauvage. When Merlyn catches a snake, he asks the Wart if he still wishes to be turned into a snake. The Wart replies that he does and begins another adventure. During this adventure, the Wart meets a snake that tells him a legend illustrating the theory of evolution. After

the story, the Wart falls into a deep sleep and Merlyn has to shout repeatedly to wake him.

Six years pass by and Kay and the Wart are becoming men. As the castle prepares for Kay's knighting ceremony, King Pellinore brings word that the King of England has died. He explains that there is a sword embedded in a stone outside a church in London. Whoever pulls the sword from the stone will be named the next king. Excited by the news, Kay insists that they travel to London. When the Wart learns of their journey, he is too depressed by the news that Merlyn is leaving the castle to be excited. After Kay's knighting, the troupe sets out for London. While Kay prepares for a tournament, he realizes he had left his sword behind, so Kay arrogantly orders the Wart to retrieve his sword from the inn. The inn is locked, however, and the Wart is forced to look elsewhere. He spies the sword in the stone and attempts to pull it out, not realizing that it is the famed sword. After three attempts, and with the encouragement of many magical animal friends, the Wart pulls the sword from the stone. He gives the sword to Kay and explains to Kay how he got it. Kay, knowing the significance of the sword, lies to his father, Sir Ector, claiming that he himself had pulled it from the stone. When Sir Ector asks Kay if his claim is true, Kay confesses his lie and admits that it was really the Wart who pulled the sword from the stone.

The Wart is crowned as the new King of England, and everyone bestows gifts and great respect upon him, including his guardian, Sir Ector. The Wart is uncomfortable with his new position of prestige and power, but is delighted when Merlyn returns and promises to stay with him for a long time.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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## Initial Understanding

Throughout the book, the Wart always lets Kay have his way. How does this make you feel? Do you feel this is a noble act, or do you think the Wart should have acted differently?

*Students may provide varied answers. One possible answer is that they feel the Wart is doing his respectful duty as an adopted son. They may consider his actions noble. Other students may feel the Wart should be more assertive with Kay. They may feel Kay takes advantage of the Wart.*

## Literary Analysis

Throughout the novel, there are references to various time periods. During what time period did this novel take place? Identify a scene that alludes to another time period. Why do you think the author includes this aspect?

*This novel takes place during the fifteenth century. There are many references to inventions that are created in later centuries such as the Morning Post newspaper, neon lights, guns, and so on. The author probably uses these references to show the reader that Merlyn really did live his life backwards. The use of these futuristic elements also adds humor to the story.*

## Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the novel, Merlyn explains the Wart's parentage to him. Why do you think the parentage of the Wart has been kept secret?

*Merlyn explains that he brought the Wart to Sir Ector's castle when the Wart was a baby, though he does not explain why. Perhaps both Merlyn and King Pendragon, the Wart's father, knew that at The Castle of the Forest Sauvage the Wart would learn honor, respect, and humility -- aspects of character that would someday make a fine king.*

## Constructing Meaning

This book is filled with both humorous and frightening stories. Which part of the book do you feel is the most humorous? Which part of the book do you think is the most frightening?

*One humorous section of the book is the Wart and Merlyn's first meeting. Merlyn asks for a pencil and paper and receives the Morning Post, an object that is obviously not from medieval times. Another humorous section of the book involves the joust between Sir Grummore and King Pellinore. The two men knock themselves unconscious when they stumble into trees. A frightening part of the book occurs when Madame Mim holds Kay and the Wart captive, intending to eat them. Only after a battle between Merlyn and Madame Mim are the boys safe.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The narrator describes Sir Ector's medieval castle in great detail. Ask your students to create a drawing of Sir Ector's castle and grounds. They should include the moat and the dog and hawk quarters.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The narrator speaks of training dogs for hunting in chapter five. Read the selection to your students. Then, ask your students to research the use of dogs in medieval hunting. Ask them to compare the description in the novel to their findings.

**Comparing and Contrasting** Show the movie *Camelot* to your students. Explain that the musical is about King Arthur's rule in the idyllic kingdom of Camelot. Then discuss the similarities and differences between the movie and the book.

**Responding to Literature** Throughout the novel, Merlyn performs many magical feats. Ask your students to identify their favorite magical feat performed by Merlyn and explain why it is their favorite.