The Cycling and Recycling of the Arthurian Myth in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*

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This thesis titled

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ABSTRACT

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The Cycling and Recycling of the Arthurian Myth in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (99 pp.)

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The Arthurian myth is a complex system of tales, each of which focuses on some aspect of the legendary King Arthur, his Knights of the Round Table, or the royal court at Camelot. The power of the myth is that it is mutable, recyclable, and recursive. The purpose of this thesis is to examine and evaluates these elements of the myth and how they have evolved from the medieval era to the Victorian era. The inquiry will focus primarily on Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and the ways in which he implemented recursive circles and cycles stylistically, structurally, and narratively throughout his individual idylls and the complete poem to wholly express the self-reflexive, appropriative, and contemporary natures of the Arthurian myth. Finally, the investigation moves toward Tennyson’s contributions to the myth and the ways authors continued to experiment artistically with the myth into the twenty-first century.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Marsha L. Dutton

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Arthurian Myth</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Historical to the Legendary Arthur</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legendary to Mythological Arthur</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Death and Rebirth of the Arthurian Myth</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synopsis of the Arthurian Myth</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennyson’s Arthurian Work: <em>Idylls of The King</em></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennyson and the Function of Social Literature</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennyson’s Career and Turn Toward Social Literature</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views on Social Literature and the Ideal</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Arthurian Myth as Recursive, Appropriate, and Contemporary</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Cycles: Birth, Death, and Rebirth</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasonal and Diurnal Cycles</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maturational Cycles</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal Cycles Moving Together as One</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There Are No True Endings</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennyson’s Contributions to the Arthurian Myth</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twain: Recycling and Reversing Cycles</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliot: Allusion and Borrowing</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. H. White: Reinvention and Maturation</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Sources</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Sources</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The Arthurian myth is a complex system of tales, each of which focuses on some aspect of the legendary King Arthur, his Knights of the Round Table, or the royal court at Camelot. Over the course of its history, writers have written countless renditions of the myth, but why? What is it exactly about the Arthurian myth that makes it such appealing subject matter for authors? Though a similar thread runs through these tales, each author treats his or her telling or retelling of the myth individualistically. The attraction of the Arthurian myth is its mutability. From the myth’s beginning, authors have appropriated it to suit their goals and purposes. In the medieval era, when England was in need of a great leader, stories of Arthur appeared. Arthur, or Aurelius Ambrosius as early authors referred to him, was an individual of honorable birth who successfully united the English people under one ruler and one religion and against foreign invaders. Whether or not this Arthur ever existed or was a real historical figure eventually became irrelevant. Eventually, the figure of Arthur, his Round Table, and his Camelot were not as important to the myth as the ways in which each author appropriated them to a particular place, situation, or time.

Inga Bryden points out in Reinventing King Arthur, “the remodeled Arthurs were more culturally revealing than the question of whether an original or authentic King Arthur actually existed” (31). Geoffrey of Monmouth created an Arthur and an Arthurian legend that were representative of twelfth-century medieval England, just as the anonymous author of the alliterative Morte Arthure did for fourteenth-century Plantagenet England, just as Tennyson did for nineteenth-century Victorian England, and as T. H. White did for twentieth century, World War II England. Eventually, the figure of Arthur, his Round Table, and his Camelot were not as important to the myth as the ways in which each author
appropriated them to a particular place, situation, or time. The Arthurian myth, like Camelot, was and still is always in the process of being built (Bryden 143).

During the seventeenth century, the Arthurian myth fell out of favor with authors, prompting a number of later writers to question why. Were the king and his court culturally, socially, and politically irrelevant? While asking these questions of relevance, authors looked at the myth retrospectively and explicitly noticed the ways in which each work, tale, or narrative functioned with the whole of the myth. By paying such close attention to the form of the myth and the structure of the legends within it, nineteenth-century authors began detecting patterns. As they looked closer at the structure of the myth, it appeared to take on a circular form and to be cyclical in nature. Certain elements of the myth were particularly recyclable and reinterpretable, and as Bryden points out, these elements are what authors manipulated and recreated to mold a work that was meaningful for them and their audiences: “By the last decades of the nineteenth century, Victorian Arthurians were acutely aware of their contribution to the manufacturing of Arthurian myth,” and to the self-reflective nature of the Arthurian myth and how the epic’s process of composition enacts the process of myth making (Bryden 31).

Nineteenth-century Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson was keenly aware of and intrigued by the many functions of the Arthurian myth and incorporated them stylistically, structurally, and narratively into his Arthurian poem *Idylls of the King*. Though most Arthurian legends were reflections of the times and places within which they were written, few authors openly acknowledged them as being so. In his poem, Tennyson created a relevant form that not only applied to his own time, but also showed precisely how the Arthurian myth adapts from one age to the next, a concept many of his contemporaries were familiar with but with
which none had artistically experimented. Furthermore, Tennyson not only illustrated how
the myth was adaptable from one age to the next, but how it was adaptable within one age
and could be used didactically. His *Idylls* perfectly depict the power of the myth to be always
contemporary.

Tennyson consciously structured his *Idylls of the King* to resemble the structure of the
Arthurian myth as a whole. Bryden mentions at the end of her interpretation of the myth
that twenty-first-century critical interpretation of the *Idylls* have begun focusing more on the
epic’s process of composition and the way it enacts the process of myth-making (143). Few,
however, have looked deeply enough at the idylls as they function both independently and
dependently to explore just how Tennyson managed to depict the structure of the Arthurian
myth within the structure of his poem. Tennyson used recursive circles and cycles
stylistically, structurally, and narratively throughout his work to express and illustrate the self-
reflexive, contemporary, and eternal nature of the Arthurian myth.

**THE ARTHURIAN MYTH**

As Beverly Taylor notes in her study of myth, myth and legend are difficult media in
which to find comfort; the historical and the literary aspects of myth remain independent
and dependent in a way that tempts readers and critics to treat them as separate entities. In
actually, the two are independent entities. One myth may find its roots in history and
another in literature, but frequently—especially as a myth continues to develop over time
and space—it moves into and out of historical and literary spaces, effectively blurring the
line between the two, eventually becoming indistinguishable; such is the case with Arthurian
myth. The first Arthurian legends claim to have roots in history, but by the early twelfth
century, they progressed from the historical sphere into the literary or legendary. During the
twelfth century, and more definitively by the nineteenth, Taylor says, “the visionary kingdom of Arthur hovered behind the real kingdom of his supposed successors who wore the English Crown” (1). Tennyson dedicated his Arthurian poem to Prince Albert, Consort of Queen Victoria, whom he believed most perfectly embodied the ideals of King Arthur; for Tennyson, Albert was not a successor of King Arthur, but was the famous and righteous king incarnate, or at least as depicted in his *Idylls of the King*.

### The Historical to the Legendary Arthur

As Geoffrey Ashe notes in his mid-twentieth century study of Arthurian legendry, whether or not a real King Arthur existed is not of importance, especially when evaluating the use of the myth in the Victorian era. Ashe labels Arthur “protean” or a “shape-shifter who has taken different forms over the course of the centuries” (Bloom 135). In *The Romance of Arthur*, James Wilhelm makes clear in his exploration into the Arthurian myth the many ways in which Arthur, his kingdom, and his warriors and/or knights changed from the fourth through the fifteenth centuries. Though the Arthur of the fifteenth century seems to have developed from the Arthur of the fourth century, the form that he takes in these narratives has changed. Frequently these changes were due to social, national, or cultural shifts. The authors of the Arthurian tales molded their Arthur to fit the environment within which they wrote him.

The earliest Arthurian tales treat Arthur as a historical figure. Scholars credit the fifth-century writer Gildas with the first documented appearance of Arthur in writing.1 Gildas’s *Ambrosius Aurelianus* is never actually called Arthur, though most literary

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1 The Welsh text *Y Gododdin* mentions an Arthurian esque leader, and though scholars believe that *Y Gododdin* predates Gildas’s text, there is currently no consensus on the precise date at which this text was written or who the author is; Thomas Charles-Edwards argues that the author is Aneirin, a writer who lived in the sixth century (66).
Historians believe the two individuals to be one and the same; in the section “The Victory at Badon Hill” from *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, Ambrosius saves the seemingly defeated Britons from the Saxon invaders:

After a time, when the cruel plunderers had gone home, God gave strength to the survivors. Wretched people fled to them from all directions . . . that they should not be altogether destroyed. Their leader was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a gentleman who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm . . . Under him our people regained their strength, and challenged the victors to battle. The Lord assented, and the battle went their way. (Gildas 28)

As Frank Reno points out in his research into the historical Arthur, Ambrosius Aurelianus was an authentic figure in Roman history, an emperor who ruled between 270 and 275 CE; history documents him traveling to Britain during his reign (Reno 263). Reno believes that Ambrosius Aurelianus was a great leader and warrior who escorted the Britons into battle against their enemy invaders, the Saxons, and continued to rule over Britain for the next forty-four years. The next author to mention Ambrosius Aurelianus was Bede in his eighth-century *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. His description closely follows that of his predecessor, Gildas.

The first chronicler to give the name Arthur to Britain’s great leader and war hero was Nennius in his ninth-century work *Historia Brittonum*. Nennius placed his Arthur firmly within the geographical regions of Britain, defined him as Christian, and elevated him in stature, equating him with the “kings of the Britons” (Wilhelm 5). The last writer to depict Arthur as a historical figure was William of Malmesbury in his twelfth-century *De rebus gestis*
regum Anglorum. In his story of Arthur, William of Malmesbury included a character named Walwen, or Gawain, thus establishing the first link between Arthur and his court (Wilhelm 7).

Though there are signs in Nennius’s and William of Malmesbury’s texts that the historical tales of Arthur were beginning to take on legendary elements, in Geoffrey of Monmouth a subtle, yet definitive, transition between history and legend occurred. Wilhelm points out that Geoffrey’s History of the Kings of Britain “combines history with legend in a highly imaginative form” (7). Reno argues of Geoffrey, “Literally, he planted the seeds for one of the most famous legends of all times, but at the expense of the facts” (279). Geoffrey may have indeed distorted historical facts and veiled truths, but in doing so he opened up a space within which Arthur could become more than a historical figure, bound to a moment in time. He created the space within which Arthur became a legend. Ashe too credits Geoffrey with changing Arthur from a historical figure to a literary one through Welsh verse and storytelling: “Arthur (whoever or whatever he was) became the monarch of Legend, quasi-historical ruler over a splendid kingdom, through the genius of one author” (143).

Geoffrey also introduces a number of the primary characters of Arthurian mythology, such as Uther, Myrddin or Merlin, Guinevere, and Mordred. He also invents the order of knighthood and finishes his tale with the wounding, not the death, of Arthur. While Wilhelm contends that Geoffrey was the first to introduce the notion of the eternality of Arthur, Richard White argues that the concept of Arthur as “the once and future king” was widespread in the Celtic region in the medieval—as early as just after the death of the historical Arthur. Authors used the medieval Arthurian tales to inspire the British to maintain a front of resistance against present and future invaders (White xxiv). After
Geoffrey, writers began freely experimenting with the Arthurian tales, taking artistic liberties in their texts that previous known writers had not.

Beginning primarily with the Welsh tales of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the new literarily inspired tales of Arthur, which only vaguely resembled the older historically based ones, began to take form. As Richard White points out in *King Arthur in Legend and History*, beginning with the Welsh legends such as *The Book of the Taliesin*, *The Mabinogion*, and *the Black Book of Carmarthen* Arthur’s kingdom begins to fill out (xvii). The legend moved from narratives that elevated Arthur alone as a real battle hero or leader to ones that emphasized a society of men and a community of people led by a strong king. For example, in the *Mabinogion*, in *Gerient ac Enid*, the romances of the Arthur’s knights and the ladies of his court take precedence and in *Owain (Yvain)* and *Peredur, Son of Efrawg (Percival)* the personal adventures of particular knights move to the forefront of works.

In approximately the eleventh century, the Arthurian legend made its way out of Britain and became a literary inspiration for authors throughout Europe. Arthur first appeared in writing across the English Channel in Brittany in 1019, in *The Legend of St. Goeznovius* by William, chaplain to Bishop Eudo of Leon,. Wilhelm notes that this work might have been the point of transmission for tales such as *Tristan* and *Parsifal* (6). Wace, born on the island of Jersey and educated in France, first translated Geoffrey’s work into French but augmented the work with his own courtly elements (White xvii). He composed his Arthurian legend, *Roman de Brut*, in Old North French and was the first author to mention a Round Table:

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2 Chrétien de Troyes refers to *Gerient ac Enid* in his *Ere and Enid*, and Tennyson references it in his idyll “The Marriage of Geraint” and “Geraint and Enid.”
Arthur constructed the Round Table,
Of which the Bretons tell great tales.
The vassals took their places there,
All chivalrous, all equal too.
They sat at dinner equally,
And they were served there equally.
None of these men were able to boast
That he sat higher than his peer;
All were seated equally;
There was not one who was left out. (Wace ll. 9751-60)

Wace also provided a further link between the Celtic Britain historians and the Celtic storytellers of Brittany (Wilhelm 96). In Wace’s narrative, he acknowledges his tale’s indebtedness to past Arthurian legends and refers to own story as being a part of the legends’ history:

I do not know if you have heard,
Marvels were experienced,
And there adventures were turned up
That are so often told of Arthur
In stories that have been dressed up—
Not all lies and not all truth,
Not all folly, not all wisdom.
The story tellers tell so much
And the yarnspinners spin so much
Embellishing their story lines

That all they tell does not sound true. (Wace ll. 9788-98)

He addresses an audience who he assumes is familiar with the whole, or at least a part, of prior Arthurian legends and, by doing so, acknowledges his own additions to it. The end of his tale, again, directly addresses his literary audience by acknowledging that they probably have partially heard some of the legendary adventures regarding Arthur. Wace then states that some of the tales are true and others are false, further blurring the line between fact and fiction and history and legend.

Perhaps the most renowned medieval French Arthurian poet was twelfth-century poet Chrétien de Troyes. Whereas the British stories of Arthur tended to focus on his accomplishments as a leader and warrior, Chrétien de Troyes wrote for a sophisticated courtly audience interested in romantic principles. Marie de Champagne patronized Chrétien and preferred tales that emphasized romance and chivalry. As a result, Chrétien shifted the focus of his tale away from Arthur and toward his knights, their deeds, and their love interests; such is the case in *Erec and Enide*, *Yvain*, *Cligés*, and *Lancelot* (White xviii).

Chrétien first introduced the love triangle between the king, his queen, and Launcelot. From his work emerged what is referred to as the French Arthurian cycle or “The Vulgate Cycle,” which includes *The Story of Merlin*, *The Prose Lancelot*, *The Grail Quest*, *The Book of Arthur*, and *The Death of Arthur*; the final work in the cycle *The Death of Arthur*, “Mort Artu,” dates to 1225. Though the work closely resembles Geoffrey of Monmouth’s, it incorporates the character of Launcelot. This narrative is commonly believed to be the inspiration for the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, which Sir Thomas Malory later used as one of his primary inspirations.
for his famous *Le Morte Darthur* (White xxi). The later Grail stories arose from Chretien’s *Perceval* or *Story of the Grail*.

Over time, as the French Arthurian romances grew in popularity, they made their way into German translations and subsequently were turned into new tales such as Heinrich von dem Tulin’s *Diu Krone* or *The Crown*. Eventually, by the late fourteenth century, the legends made their way back to England, having greatly changed on their journey through the European continent. Between 1330 and 1340, Thomas of Chestre wrote his Middle English *The Fair Unknown*, which is a translation of the Old French *Biaus Descouneus* by Renart de Beaujeau (White 396), and in 1400 he wrote *Syr Launfal*, a translation of Marie de France’s twelfth-century lai *Lanval* (459). Foreign authors no longer borrowed from the English authors’ tales, but English authors from theirs.

*The stanzaic Morte Arthur, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Romance of Merlin* were all British works inspired by French versions of English sources—the same French versions that only shortly before had found their inspiration in the early British forms of the Arthurian legends. Just as the English stanzaic *Morte Arthur* was based upon the French *Mort Artu*, which was later the inspiration for Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* (White 419), the elements of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were probably reworkings of Chrétien’s *Eric* and other works (438), and Henry Lovelich’s *The Romance of Merlin* was based upon the French *Lestoire de Merlin* (White 475). English Arthurian writers, in their attempts to reclaim the legend for themselves, reinterpreted, manipulated, and revised tales that over the previous two hundred years had been reinterpreted, manipulated, and revised versions of the original British Arthurian tales. In due course, English authors again borrowed from more contemporary English literary pieces on which to build their new Arthurian tales. An example of this
practice, White argues, is *The Weddynge of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, which was written in the mid-fifteenth century and inspired by Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* (White 481). This system of continual borrowing of tales, first by the French and Germans from the British and Welsh, then the British and Welsh from French and Germans, and finally the Americans, such as Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee* and Steinbeck in *Tortilla Flat* and *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Court*, from all of them, illustrates that the Arthurian legend was always in itself circular or cyclical.

**Legendary to Mythological Arthur**

From approximately 400-1400 CE, Arthur, his court, and the tales about them developed from legendary into mythic status. The tales that had begun as history changed into legend, and these legends ultimately changed into myth. A man who may or may not even have existed during the fourth century had by the nineteenth century secured a place in multiple histories and managed to transcend place, space, and time. As Taylor explains in *The Return of King Arthur*:

> Each age in which the stories have been told and re-told has found in them the means of expressing something of its own attitudes, ideals, and anxieties, and this is as true of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with which we are here concerned, as of the Middle Ages, when the great bodies of the Arthurian stories crystallized around the charismatic figure of the figure of the Once and Future King. (1)

In her research into the Arthurian legend, Taylor notes that though many authors worked with Arthurian material purely for artistic purposes or as creative expression, many chose to experiment with the Arthur myth because it could be molded to give new insights
and significance to contemporary concerns and present realities through a well-known but imagined past: “From the Arthurian legend, writers and artists took the situations, themes and motifs which had most meaning for them, by means of which they could give new and symbolic expression to their own experiences” (1). The expansion of the Arthurian myth led to the creation of an Arthurian society that lent itself to reflect other societies in meaningful ways through symbolism and motif. The historical king, his men, and his kingdom were artistically reinvented in a way that no longer merely retold a history but now reinvented a history that reflected and confronted contemporary realities.

The power of myth is its ability subtly to draw attention to subjects, experiences, or impulses of which individuals and societies are not always fully aware. These patterns are in themselves timeless and frequently have social, cultural, and historical contemporary equivalents with which new societies identify themselves on subconscious and conscious levels. The Arthurian stories, Taylor says, deal directly not with the reality of situations but with the recurring patterns of life and relationships (9). For example, in Le Morte Darthur, Sir Thomas Malory experimented with the mutability of the legends and reinterpreted, revised, and rewrote the tales to suit his needs, but he did so retrospectively. In his work, Malory weaves a number of Arthurian legends together to form an overview of the entire myth. He pulls from the Welsh, French, and English traditions and integrates the stories of Lancelot, Tristam, Gawain, Percivale, and Galahad into one Arthurian tale. One of his goals in the work was to evaluate the actions of the Round Table as a whole, as he was only able to do by threading together all of the past stories regarding each knight. He then used his evaluation of Arthur’s knights and kingdom to estimate his own king and society. Malory’s primary goal was to create a work that blended the legends in a way that articulated the messages he
wished to convey to his audience. Whereas, previous writers, like Malory, wrote their Arthurian legends “about” their times Tennyson wrote “for” his, Tennyson openly recognized the mythic history and structure of the Arthurian legend when he decided to acknowledge it as myth, use its subject matter, and manipulate its structure in one of his greatest works, his *Idylls*.

**THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF THE ARTHURIAN MYTH**

From the medieval era through the fifteenth century, the Arthurian myth grew in popularity, and authors seem to have been at no loss for ideas of new and creative ways of reinterpreting the myth. According to Derek Pearsall, author of *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, the English history of Arthur reached its highest point in 1485. In this year, William Caxton published Malory's *Morte Darthur*, which achieved great recognition with the literate population of England. The Tudor family, who had Welsh ancestry, even went so far as to claim legitimate ancestral ties to King Arthur, when they succeeded to the nation's throne; Henry Tudor named his first son, born in 1486, “Arturus secundus” (Pearsall 110).

In the years immediately following this notable increase in interest regarding Arthurian legendry, however, an equal decline in interest occurred. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Arthur and his court lost favor with authors, artists, and the public alike. After Malory's Arthurian work was published in 1634, it did not appear again for nearly two centuries (117). Though Arthurian legendry did not completely disappear, during that time it suffered its greatest historically documented decline. When Tennyson began experimenting with recreating a new Arthurian legend applicable to the Victorian period, a great number of his contemporaries criticized the project.
In 1833, the year Tennyson began composing his first idyll, "Morte d'Arthur," Coleridge said, "In my judgment, an epic poem must either be national or mundane. As to Arthur, you could not by any means make a poem national to Englishmen. What have we to do with him?" (Staines 1). In the late seventeenth century, John Milton contemplated resurrecting the Arthurian myth in the Renaissance and using it as his subject material for his national epic, but, as Anne Braude points out in her study of the myth, he believed the tales to be too narrow a subject and lacking in the grandeur and weight needed for such a task. Rather, he decided to compose his epic—what would be Paradise Lost—on the entire human race (17).

In the late eighteenth century, Wordsworth openly contemplated in the First Book of his Prelude what material might best suit the "arduous work" upon which he was newly embarking; before settling on his own mind as the subject of his masterpiece, he notes:

To summon back from lonesome banishment,
And make them dwellers in the hearts of men
Now living, or to live in future years.
Sometimes the ambitious Power of choice, mistaking
Proud spring-tide swellings for a regular sea,
Will settle on some British theme, some old
Romantic Tale by Milton left unsung. (Wordsworth ll.163-69)

Though he does not directly name Arthur or his legends in the poem, he is clearly referring to Milton's rejection of the Arthurian myth. Wordsworth, like Milton, decided not to use Arthur for his primary inspiration, feeling that the tales did not suit the goals of the work he
sought to write for nineteenth-century England. For Coleridge and Wordsworth, the myths were simply no longer valid and did not have anything to offer their readers.

Throughout Tennyson’s career as an artist, his commitment to King Arthur never wavered. In *A Variorum Edition of Tennyson's* Idylls of the King, John Pfordresher notes: "Evidently from the days of his youth Tennyson had resolved on creating a 'major poem,' and from an equally early period he settled upon the Arthurian legends as a subject which had not yet been exhausted" (19). Alfred Tennyson’s son Hallam discovered among his father's early notes three sketches for an Arthurian work: a short poem, an allegorical framework for a larger work, and an outline for a five-act play (H. Tennyson, *Memoir II* 121-125).

Before the release of the first *Idyll*, Tennyson experimented with the direction in which he wished to take his Arthurian project. He completed writing "Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere" in 1830, "The Lady of Shallot" in 1832, and "Sir Galahad" in 1834, but he did not publish them all until much later in 1842 (Staines 9-13). Grey notes that Tennyson’s principal resources while writing *Idylls of the King* were Malory and Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of the Welsh *Mabinogion*. He also readily pulled ideas from Arthurian sources such as the works of Layamon, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Chrétien de Troyes, to name a few (Gray 304-71). According to Hallam Tennyson in his two *Memoir* volumes, as Tennyson became increasingly comfortable writing Arthurian legendry, his dependence on Malory became less: “he has made the old legends his own, restored the idealism, and infused into them a spirit of modern thought and an ethical significance . . . as indeed otherwise these archaic stories would not have appealed to the modern world at
large” (H. Tennyson, Memoir I 122). Tennyson’s intention was never to emulate past myths but to design a myth that was solely his own and purely Victorian.

Coleridge and Wordsworth were not the only literary artists to question Arthur’s validity for nineteenth-century England. After reading a number of Tennyson’s idylls, Ruskin wrote directly to him to articulate his concerns: “It seems to me that so great power ought not be spent on visions of things past but on the living present. For one hearer capable of feeling the depth of this poem I believe then would feel a depth quite as great if the stream flowed through things nearer and hearer” (H. Tennyson, Memoir I, 455). Like his contemporaries, Ruskin did not fully understand the power of myth, especially that of the Arthurian myth, to portray and convey contemporary concerns to a present-day society through imagery. Ruskin believed real social problems should only be addressed through real-life situations and examples; the power of myth was lost on him.

Fortunately, not all readers felt as Ruskin did about the way in which one should approach social issues. A comment which Prince Albert includes in a letter to Tennyson regarding the Idylls perhaps best articulates what Tennyson achieved by portraying contemporary concerns in the guise of Arthurian legendry: “They quite rekindle the feeling with which the legends of King Arthur must have inspired the chivalry of old, whilst the graceful form in which they are presented blends those feelings with the softer tone of our present age” (455). At a time when few recognized the usefulness of the Arthurian myth and many called it antiquated, Tennyson fully acknowledged its timeless potential.

A number of other Victorian writers did, however, recognize and appreciate the power of the Arthurian myth and experimented with it themselves; Matthew Arnold, William Morris, and Algernon Swinburne each created an Arthurian tale of his own.
However, it was not primarily the medieval Arthurian tales that inspired most Victorian writers, but medievalism as a whole. Antony H. Harrison points out in “Arthurian Poetry and Medievalism” that “by the early Victorian period a reified language of medievalism was current and visible in politics, literature, art, architecture, theology, love-making and popular entertainment; It was characterized by specialized vocabulary, a distinctive iconography and the use of particular literary genres . . . and it involved a network of value-laden associations.” He says that authors expressed ideals such as chivalry, manliness, selflessness, gallantry, nobility, honor, duty, and fidelity explicitly and implicitly in terms of “medieval literature, mythology, and iconography” (246). Coleridge’s “Christabel” is one the most distinguished “medieval” poems written during this time. For Coleridge, Arthur may have been considered antiquated, but the discourse associated with him and the era of his origin, the medieval era, was not. Harrison credits Tennyson with popularizing this discourse and leading the way for other authors to use it; the wide dissemination of his first poems, “Morte d’Arthur” and “The Lady of Shalott,” and later his *Idylls*, piqued the engagement of the common reader with this language and the themes related to it (247).

According to Staines, Tennyson’s contemporaries who also employed Victorian realism and wrote Arthurian myths disliked his *Idylls of the King* because they claimed that it was devoid of the particular charm associated with the Middle Ages; they disliked his propensity to recreate the legends as opposed to preserving them. Morris disapproved of Tennyson's infusing modern sentiment into an ancient legend and his reinvention of traditional medieval myth, and Swinburne disagreed with what he referred to as Tennyson's overly embellished retellings of Arthurian legendry (159-61). After Tennyson published “The Last Tournament” in the *Contemporary Review* 1871, Arnold reviled the work, complaining
that it “lowered the note and deformed the outline of the Arthurian story, by reducing Arthur to the level of a wittol, Guinevere to the level of a woman of intrigue, and Lancelot to the level of a ‘co-respondent’” (Patton 265). Tennyson seriously edited, altered, and manipulated Arthurian myths in a way that suited his Arthurian vision, and he created an Arthurian legend for his time.

Harrison contends that Tennyson’s work best illustrates “traditional and conservative engagement with the medievalist discourse in mid-Victorian England” (247). All of the Victorian Arthurian authors reinvented the tales in some fashion to create what Harrison calls a “culturally pervasive discourse” that utilized “varied ideological effects through which their work could acquire cultural power” (248). Each author used the Arthurian myth for a similar purpose; they simply had different goals for what they wished to achieve with their version of the legend. Tennyson may have more freely altered and manipulated traditional plot- and character-related elements of the Arthurian tales than previous writers, but his overall faithfulness to medievalism was unrivaled; he truly created a polyvalent cultural discourse between the medieval and the Victorian.

Essentially, all authors of Arthurian myths, from the medieval era to the Victorian, composed their works for the purpose of representing their time, as a reflection of past time, or as a combination of the two. As John R. Reed points out in “Tennyson’s Narrative on Narration,” “All narrative, from folktale to history, may have to do with legitimacy and authority, an ordering of the world not merely in time, but according to a pattern of belief” (191). Like Morris, Arnold, Rossetti, and Swinburne, Tennyson's concern was to recreate the myth in a way that spoke to and inspired Victorian England. Tennyson, however, had another goal he wished to achieve through his retelling of the tales. Tennyson realized that
the brilliance of the Arthurian myth was that it was adaptable and, like Arthur, returns and is reinvented to suit the needs of the new author and the new time in which it is written. In his *Idylls*, Tennyson created a relevant form that not only applied to his own time, but also showed how Arthurian myth adapts from one age to the next.

Tennyson answered Coleridge's question, "What have we to do with him?" directly, with his *Idylls of the King*. The popularity of Tennyson’s first idylls was astounding; ten thousand copies sold in its first week of publication, and the idylls to follow were equally successful. Not only did Tennyson create a popular work that reignited nineteenth-century England’s interest in Arthur, but in his *Idylls* he attempted to prove that the myth was not only valid to the nineteenth century or to England, but that it was potentially relevant and applicable to all times and any nations.

**SYNOPSIS OF THE ARTHURIAN MYTH**

The Arthurian myth is made up of myriad tales, and though each author who added to the myth brought to it new contributions and perspectives, which altered the legend just slightly with each retelling, some constant stories, characters, and themes carry through the myth. The character who has a place in each and every Arthurian tale is, not surprisingly, Arthur. Though he is the primary figure in some tales and only secondary or nearly nonexistent in others, directly or indirectly, he is in every work. In the first legends, Arthur is a war hero who leads the British people against medieval Saxon invaders. Eventually, authors link Arthur as earthly leader to Arthur as spiritual leader. The spiritual and earthly become irrevocably linked in most of the Arthurian stories; battles are not simply between opposing nations or people but also between good and evil or temporal and spiritual
passions. In these early works, Arthur is the primary focus, and his men and kingdom are overshadowed by his heroic actions.

As more authors began experimenting with the myths, the story of Arthur became less intriguing, and, in search of new material, authors created background and filled in narrative gaps his story. Moving away from Arthur, but not too distantly, authors constructed tales about his origins. Arthur is the son of Uther Pendragon and Igraine, or Ygerne; he is illegitimately conceived when Uther disguises himself under the magic of Merlin and has sex with Gorlois’s wife. Arthur is half brother to Anna, later named Morgause, the daughter of Gorlois and Igraine. Anna marries King Lot and bears Gawain, Gaheris, Agrain, Gareth, and Mordred. In a number of works, Gaheris murders Morgause when he finds her having an affair with Lamorak, the son of Pellinore, the man who killed King Lot. In some tales, Arthur, not knowing his familial relationship to Anna, incestuously fathers Mordred. Mordred is the malevolent character who injures Arthur and usurps his kingdom. In some tales, Mordred seduces Arthur’s queen Guinevere in an attempt to weaken the king and his kingdom before conquering them. Morgan Le Fay, too, is the half-sister of Arthur in some stories. Daughter of Igraine and the King of Cornwall, she embodies magical powers and frequently challenges Arthur and his court.

Frequently, after Arthur is born, Merlin gives him to another, usually Sir Ector, to raise for safety until Merlin feels Arthur is ready to reign or when England needs him. After being crowned king, Arthur marries Guinevere, the daughter of a neighboring king, usually Leodegrance, Ogrfan Gawr, or King Garlin. The Lady of the Lake bestows Excalibur on Arthur, the mighty sword by which he rules and fights. In some legends, young Arthur pulls the sword from the stone or anvil atop a marble block, proving he is the rightful king,
chosen by Christ to rule over Camelot. The Lady of the Lake is sometimes also known as Nineve, Nimue, or Vivien and is the woman who manipulates Merlin and eventually entombs him. Arthur rules until he is gravely injured by Mordred, but rarely dies. Rather, three queens take him to the Isle of Avalon to heal. Before Vivien entombs Merlin, the sorcerer serves primarily as a prophet and advisor to Arthur.

As authors fleshed out the story of Arthur, they began building and developing tales focusing on the knights of the Round Table and the women of the court. These tales center on themes of chivalry, romance, manliness, selflessness, gallantry, nobility, honor, duty, and fidelity. The most enduring characters in the Arthurian legends are Guinevere, Gawain, Lancelot, Galahad, Percivale, Mordred, King Mark, Tristram, and Isolt, and the stories that most permeate the Arthurian myth are those regarding Gawain, the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, the relationship between Tristram and Isolt, and the Grail Quest.

A number of tales detail the exploits of Gawain, initially one of Arthur’s most honorable knights and his chief knight until the Chrétien’s introduces Lancelot. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, he alone represents Arthur’s court after the Green Knight challenges the honor of Arthur and his men. The Green Knight subjects Gawain to a number of tests, which challenge his honor, prowess, spirituality, loyalty, and trustworthiness; though he fails one test, ultimately, he passes these trials and proves that both he and Arthur’s court are nearly as honorable as they purported themselves to be. However, in this tale, the Knights of the Round Table and Gawain occasionally, momentarily flinch, revealing the cracks that are just beginning to threaten Arthur’s once ideal society. In later legends, as the kingdom’s inhabitants becomes more flawed, and earthly passions and honor become the force driving the court’s actions, Gawain gives in to
his amorous inclinations more consistently and in the stories of Pelleas and Ettarre, turns against his knightly brother Pelleas, succumbs to lust, and seduces his fellow knight desires. In later legends, Gawain primarily represents the failures of the court in romantic ideals.

The story consistently present throughout most Arthurian tales is the affair between Sir Lancelot and Guinevere. Lancelot, or Lancelot du Lac, is one of the most honorable and capable knights of the court; his physical prowess and combative abilities are unparalleled by the other knights of the Round Table. Lancelot is the son of King Ban, but after the death of his father, the Lady of the Lake hides and raises him and eventually introduces him to King Arthur’s court. Though he is seemingly faithful, loyal, honorable, and trustworthy in almost every way, Lancelot’s weakness lies in his love of one woman, Arthur’s wife, Queen Guinevere. Despite knowing that the illicit love the two share will cause irrevocable damage to the court and the king, their love rules their every action and choice they make. In some stories, Elaine, the daughter of the Fisher King, tricks Lancelot into having sex with her disguises herself as Guinevere, and the two have a son, Galahad, together. As Arthur’s kingdom falls, Arthur’s discovery of the affair is usually the last action that occurs before the complete collapse of the kingdom. In spite of the affair, Lancelot is one of the Round Table’s most praiseworthy knights.

The three primary characters in the story of Tristram and Isolt are King Mark, his soon-to-be wife Isolt, and his admirable nephew Tristram. King Mark sends Tristram to Ireland to escort his uncle betrothed to him, but during the course of the trip back to Cornwall, Tristram and Isolt accidentally drink a love potion initially intended for the King and Isolt. Despite the love potion’s effects, Isolt must still marry Mark, a marriage which leads to the development of a relationship much like Guinevere and Lancelot’s.
The stories often differ in the severity of punishment King Mark bestows upon the couple. In some stories, he exiles his wife to a leper colony as punishment for her illicit affair and is depicted as a cruel individual who deserves little sympathy, while in others, he is a figure to empathize with, who is deeply hurt by the affair between Isolt and Tristram. In some legends, the potion’s effects are permanent, and in others they are temporary. Responsibility becomes a primary issue in a number of tales, because though the two are enchanted and their love is to be considered an act beyond their control, a number of versions complicate this issue by insinuating that once the potion had worn off, the lovers pretend it has not, and continue their affair, while in other versions, authors imply that the two have amorous feelings for one another before taking the love potion and that their drinking the potion is not “accidental.” Like Lancelot and Guinevere, the relationship between Isolt and Tristram calls into question aspects of responsibility and loyalty to one’s king versus loyalty to one’s lover.

The Grail Quest is one of the oldest tales of the Arthurian legend, dating back to the early medieval era. In it, Arthur’s men go in search of the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper and was used by Joseph of Arimathea to catch Christ’s blood at his crucifixion. In some legends, the Grail is a plate used to serve Christ at the Last Supper. Prophecies foretell the Grail’s rediscovery by the best knight in the land, a descendant of Joseph of Arimathea. This knight is the only knight who may take a seat at the Siege Perilous, a chair reserved at the Round Table for the founder of the Holy Grail. The search for the Grail is a spiritual pursuit that tests the pureness of the knights and is usually undertaken by Percivale, Galahad, and Lancelot; in some versions, Sir Bors and Gawain partake in the quest.
While on their journeys, each knight endures a number of grueling tasks, which test his virtue: charity, chastity, and truth. Lancelot usually catches a glimpse of the Grail, but as a result of his indiscretions with Guinevere, he is unable to obtain the grail. Percival, Parzival or Peredur, comes close to succeeding in the quest, but fall just short of achieving it. Percival, raised by his mother in the woods away from the temptations of humankind, despite bodily suffering and unquestionable purity, frequently fails to ask the one question he must to obtain the grail and dies shortly after viewing it. In other tales, after viewing the Grail, Percival quits earthly life and becomes a hermit, devoting his life to God. Galahad is the only knight to fulfill the Grail Quest and take a seat at the Siege Perilous. In some narratives, Galahad gains immediate entry into Heaven, and in others he is given the power to choose the time of his death. The Grail Quest emphasizes the virtuousness of the court and the knights’ allegiances to spiritual matters; often a knight’s earthly duties and passions force him to sacrifice the highest spiritual ideals.

Throughout the Arthurian myth, Arthur’s court serves as an exemplar for the highest earthly and spiritual ideals. Arthur founded Camelot on such ideals, and it was initially the duty of the knights to uphold principles of honor, prowess, spirituality, loyalty, trust, and truth. However, Arthur’s kingdom begins to collapse under the weight of these standards, unable to uphold them all simultaneously. The legends trace the king and his court’s movement from their height to their demise; each knight’s failure to uphold one of these ideals is a crack in the kingdom’s foundation. In each tale, authors explore different flaws and the ways in which they influence the knights, the community, and their king. Eventually, these imperfections compound and ultimately lead to the demise of Arthur, the Round Table, and Camelot.
TENNYSN’S ARTHURIAN WORK: IDYLLS OF THE KING

One of the primary complaints Tennyson’s contemporaries had concerning his *Idylls* was the many liberties he exercised when retelling the myth. Though he faithfully borrows from some sources, he freely borrows from others or entirely reinvents legends. At moments in his work, he intertwined sections from past legends or completely reinvented them in new and inventive ways to suit his purposes. Tennyson’s goal was to create a new legend that pulled from the whole of the Arthurian myth and told the story of Victorian England.

Tennyson instilled in Arthur and his court the ideals he felt Victorian society needed to uphold or reestablish, such as loyalty to one’s nation and leader, marital fidelity, camaraderie, and spiritual and earthly faith. The primary difference between previous Arthurian legends and Tennyson’s is that in the earlier tales Arthur was very much at the heart of the rise and fall of his kingdom and his knights; it was his failures and weaknesses that ultimately lead to the demise of Camelot. Whereas, in *Idylls of the King*, the community’s weaknesses, not Arthur’s, are not to blame for the collapse. Despite the blameless king’s efforts to preserve and to restore the ideals of his faltering kingdom, the flaws of his men and women are to many and the kingdom falls.

The first idyll, “The Coming of Arthur,” details the death of Uther and the birth of Arthur. It moves through Arthur’s coronation, his marriage to Guinevere, and his rise in power. Arthur enters the city of Camelard and helps the king drive out the beasts. When the king questions Arthur’s heritage and right to rule, Merlin reveals the details of his royal lineage. Content with Arthur’s status, the king weds his daughter to him. The idyll ends on Arthur’s successful establishment of a new order.
Tennyson wanted his Arthur to represent the highest ideals, and as such he presents him as “blameless,” which Tennyson calls him five times throughout the poem. In the *Idylls*, Arthur represents earthly and spiritual perfection, and as others sin and commit atrocities against him, their fellow knights, and the community, he tries first to maintain and later to restore order and the good he believes is innate in humankind. Throughout the poem, Arthur leads his people by example; he lives honestly and expects the same of others.

Tennyson removed any elements from the former tales that placed Arthur’s role as a moral figure and role model into question. Tennyson’s Arthur does not father an illegitimate child with his half-sister; nor is he the product of an adulterous encounter between Uther and Ygerne; Uther kills Gorlois and weds Ygerne, who later gives birth to Arthur. Tennyson restored Arthur to his former glory and depicted him as he exists in the first Arthurian tales, as a strong, confident, and benevolent leader.

“Gareth and Lynette” tells the story of Gareth becoming a knight in Arthur’s court and the challenges and tests he endures and triumphs in order to do so. Gareth is the son of King Lot and Bellicent, Arthur’s half-sister, daughter of Ygerne and Gorlois, and brother to Gawain and Mordred. In his retelling of this story, Tennyson changes Bellicent’s name from Anna or Morgause to divorce the king fully from the past tales that associate him, her, and Mordred. In the idyll, Bellicent does not want her son to grow up, but after much pleading, Gareth gains the permission of his overbearing mother to travel to Camelot. Here he works as a servant in the kitchen until he volunteers to fight for Arthur by helping Lynette defeat the Brotherhood of Day and Night. Despite being demeaned and taunted mercilessly by the maiden as he battles the knights, he defeats them all, and, at the end of the idyll, he marries the Lady Lyonors.
The two idylls about Enid and Geraint, “The Marriage of Geraint” and “Geraint and Enid,” follow the original story in the *Mabinogion* quite closely. The first of the two idylls begins with the marriage of Geraint and Enid and his giving up his knightly duties to be close to her at all times. Enid, hearing the demeaning things being said about her husband and his immaculate behavior, keeps the rumors a secret from her husband, trying to protect him. Knowing nothing about the rumors about him, one night, when Geraint wakes to find his wife crying, he becomes suspicious, knowing of the queen’s infidelity, and immediately believes that she too is being unfaithful to him. The idyll then flashes back to the meeting of Geraint and Enid and all of the deeds he performed to win her love. It ends in the marriage.

The next idyll returns to the present, when Geraint, as punishment for the transgression he believes his wife has committed, dresses her in the rags he initially found her in on their first meeting, throws her onto a horse with him, and takes her on a quest to prove her fidelity. At the castle of Doorm, Enid prove faithful in a number of situations and Geraint, seeing her devotion to him, recognizes the error of his ways and begs for her forgiveness. In the *Idylls*, Tennyson presents women as either “true,” faithful, or “false,” unfaithful in his evaluation of relationships; Enid represents one of the true women of Arthur’s court, but the actions of Geraint are fueled by the suspicion that all of the court’s several adulterous affairs have cast over the kingdom. The unfaithful relationships begin tainting the faithful ones by association, ultimately weakening Arthur’s court.

In “Balin and Balan” Arthur welcomes the brothers back into the court, and as thanks and to earn the respect of the king, Balan offers to hunt down a daemon lurking in the woods. However, while searching the forest, he finds the lovers Lancelot and Guinevere and confused by their affair, angrily flees to the castle of Pellam and Garlon. Garlon speaks
ill of Guinevere, inciting Balin’s rage, despite his best attempts to deny it. Balan storms into
the woods, and in a fit of anger and believing that he has found the daemon for which he
initially sought, he mindlessly attacks and kills his brother Balin.

When Arthur meets Balin and Balan sitting beside their fountain, he asks, “Tell me
your names; why sat ye by the well?” (“Balan and Balan” l. 48). After hearing the story of
Balan’s past misdeeds, Arthur ends the conversation by forgiving Balan and accepting him
back into his kingdom as a reformed man: “Rise my true knight. As children learn, be thou /
Wiser for falling! Walk with me, and move / To music with the Order and King” (l. 72-74).

For Arthur, his men may fall, but none is irredeemable. Arthur champions penance,
forgiveness, and redemption even if his efforts do not always foster the results he hopes for;
he tries not to lose faith in humanity, especially those who reside in Camelot. Unfortunately,
despite his best intentions and will to do good, Balan cannot live up to the ideal standards
expected of him by Arthur and his court, a concept Tennyson explores throughout his Idylls.

Is ideal living ever a possibility, and despite most’s inability to achieve it, should individuals
still not strive for it? This is a question that goes seemingly unanswered at the end of the

Vivien, in “Vivien and Merlin,” spends most of the idyll reiterating the rumors about
the king, his queen, and the knights because of her spite at Arthur and his Round Table; her
tongue “rage like fire among the noblest names, / Polluting, and imputing her whole self, /
Defaming and effacing, till she left / Not even Lancelot brave, nor Galahad clean” (l. 800-
804). When she is not speaking ill of the court in this idyll, she is busy seducing Merlin in an
attempt to gain from him the secrets about his powers. While Merlin momentarily submits
to her wiles, she cast a spell and encloses him in a tree, entombing the wizard alive. Vivien
represents Tennyson’s “false” woman. It is also of interest to mention, that in the *Idylls*, Merlin’s magic has little to do with Arthur’s achievement, thus placing this Arthur and his court safety within the “real” world. Tennyson’s Arthur rises by his own merits and true ideals.

In “Launcelot and Elaine,” Elaine does not seduce Launcelot and give birth to Galahad, as in some legends; rather she is pure and true. Elaine loves Launcelot selflessly, yet despite her devotion to him, his love for Guinevere keeps him from returning this incorrupt love. Elaine nurses a wounded Launcelot back to health, despite knowing her will never return her love. Eventually, she dies from her unrequited love. Her final request is that her brother float her dead body down the river toward Camelot with a letter addressed to Launcelot in her hand. After reading the letter, Launcelot feels much guilt and remorse over her death. Elaine represents Tennyson’s “true” woman, but unlike Enid, her faithfulness and his illicit affair lead to her demise. Again, Tennyson includes this relationship to illustrate the ways in which illicit affairs not only effect the individuals involved but also implicate and hurt the innocent and damage larger social relationships and structures.

“The Holy Grail” begins with a flashback of the now dead Percivale entering a monastery after his quest for the Grail; he recounted the Round Table’s search for the holy chalice to Ambrosius. He explains to the monk how the quest began: while Arthur is away, his sister, a nun, enters the court and tells Galahad of a vision she had in which he was the Grail Knight. In response, Galahad sits in the Siege Perilous, an act which causes lightening to strike Arthur’s Hall, catch fire, and crumble. All of the knights go in pursuit of the Grail. Most of the knights fail, like Gawain, who abandons his search in favor of lustfully spending the time with three women camped in a field. In Tennyson, Gawain represents most of what
is wrong with Victorian society regarding romance; he loves irrationally, irresponsibly, and selfishly. Launcelot and Percivale catch glimpses of the Grail, while Galahad sees it fully and is immediately ushered into Heaven. The entire story is told in the form of a second-hand report from Ambrosius. With Percivale and Galahad choosing spiritual lives over the earthly one of the court, Arthur’s Round Table begin splintering irretrievably.

The court continues to fracture in “Pelleas and Ettarre.” Pelleas is in love with Ettarre, who does not share his feelings, and though she enjoys the attention he showers upon her, she frequently mocks and belittles him, even after he wins the Tournament of Youths for her. Gawain, knowing Pelleas’s feelings for Ettarre, ignores them and lustfully pursues the lady, telling her he has killed the amorous knight. Finding the two lying together in her pavilion, Pelleas lays his sword over their necks but does not kill them, as a sign of mercy. Seeing the sword, she realizes how false Gawain is and how true the knight she turned away was. She pines and withers away for him, desiring his love in vain for the rest of her life.

Pelleas may have shown Gawain mercy but not forgiveness. Before leaving the court, he asks if any of the Round Table knights have held to their vows. Percival, aware of the insincerity of the knights, is unable to answer. The hypocrisy of the court confuses young Pelleas and skews his sense of honor, loyalty, and trust. Confused and enraged, Pelleas abandons the court, declaring the knights false, and does not return until the Tournament of The Dead Innocence as the Red Knight. The hypocritical actions of seemingly honorable men and women of Arthur’s court, ultimately destroy a young and innocent knight. The court no longer fosters honorable knights but torments young warriors.
“The Last Tournament” begins with Guin evere finding a sickly baby with a ruby necklace around its neck. The baby dies, and heartbroken the queen asks Arthur to hold a tournament in its memory, The Tournament of the Dead Innocence; a title Tennyson includes as reminiscent of not just the baby, but also of Arthur’s court. Just then, the king’s churl, “ribb’d from ear to ear,” enters the hall and explains to him that Pelleas, now the evil Red Knight, attacked him and sent him back to Arthur to report to the king and “his liars” that he has set up his own Round Table of “harlots,” in opposition to the king’s. Arthur leaves Launcelot in charge of the tournament and heads north to confront the Red Knight. Tristram and Isolt arrive in Camelot, and Tristram wins the tournament and the ruby necklace as his prize, which he gives to his adulterous lover Isolt. In Tennyson’s version of this story, Tristram is arrogant and cruel and before leaving Camelot, comments extensively on the failures of Arthur’s kingdom. Isolt is equally disagreeable. The pair’s relationship seems to be built upon their hatred of others, the two continually propagating destructive rumors and demeaning others, especially King Mark and Arthur. The lovers represent short sightedness; their selfish and aberrant love for one another isolates them from the rest of the society. Tennyson in no way attempts to romanticize the couple’s illicit relationship as past tales attempted to do. The idylls ends with King Mark creeping out of the shadows and cleaves Tristram’s brain through and Guinevere falling at Arthur’s feet sobbing.

“Guinevere” might be Tennyson’s most original idyll. Guinevere flees the court out of shame after breaking off her affair with Launcelot and joins a convent, anonymously, in Almesbury. Guinevere is Tennyson’s final “false” woman. While she is there, she hears rumors of a war between Arthur and Launcelot. The king believes Launcelot is hiding the queen in his castle across the sea. Meanwhile, with the king away, Mordred usurps his
throne. A novice tells the queen, not knowing it is she, that all of this malevolence is the fault of the evil queen. After being relentlessly chastised by the novice, Guinevere frightens the young child away and reflects upon the years past. Wracked with guilt, she runs through the nunnery only to run into Arthur, at whose feet she falls, grovels, and begs for forgiveness. After Guinevere confesses her sins and begs him for forgiveness, he pardons her but not before telling her that she is polluted. No other author of an Arthurian tale treats Guinevere with the intense level of disapproval as Tennyson does his. After contemplating killing herself, she decides to stay at the convent in search of redemption; she remains here until her death. Tennyson further absolves her of her sins, the narrator noting that she died as an Abbess, good and pure.

Finally, in “The Passing of Arthur,” after being wounded while killing Mordred, a dying Arthur contemplates the collapse of his kingdom. Near the end of the previous idyll, Arthur notes explicitly to Guinevere the initial goals and ideals he initially hoped his kingdom and his Round Table would uphold:

I made them lay their hands in mine and swear
To reverence the King, as if he were
Their conscience, and their conscience as their King,
To break the heathen and uphold Christ,
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs.
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
To honour his own word as if his God's,
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,

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3 Tennyson's treatment of Guinevere later prompted Morris to write the work “The Defense of Guinevere.”
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
And to worship her by years of noble deeds . . .
Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought, and amiable words
And courtliness, and the desire for fame,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man. (“Guinevere” ll. 464-80)

At the end of his life, he realizes that despite the court’s initial good intentions, aspects of selfishness, greed, earthly passions and ambitions, and lust have pervaded Camelot and the Round Table. As a result, his time and his kingdom’s time have come to an end. He laments the passing of his kingdom and symbolically asks Bedivere to cast Excalibur back into the lake from which it came. Yet, in the end, Arthur holds out hope that another, more honorable society will soon replace the one that has passed: “The old order changeth, yielding place to the new” (“The Passing of Arthur” ll. 407-08). Finally, the three queens escort Arthur to Avalon, the barge disappearing into the light of a new year.

Tennyson designed his Idylls as a critique and a warning to Victorian England. He saw the cracks beginning to form, which he believed threatened the continuation of Victorian society. Tennyson hoped that by designing an Arthurian legend that mirrored and illustrated these social evils for the public through his story of Arthur and his Camelot, he might be able to prompt the community at large to reevaluate itself and avoid the pitfalls he depicted in his idylls. Unfortunately, Tennyson’s work did not achieve all he had hoped and like in the situation between Arthur and Balan, Tennyson was unable to save the Victorians from designing and succumbing their own weaknesses.
TENNYSON AND THE FUNCTION OF SOCIAL LITERATURE

Tennyson’s Career and Turn Toward Social Literature

Despite the success of many of Tennyson’s early poems, he never believed that the English reading public at large would ever care for his poetry. He was also sensitive to critics, but with the encouragement of his best friend Arthur Hallam, who continually urged him to find humor in the “captious and unintelligent criticism,” and of close family and friends, he continued composing and publishing (H. Tennyson, Memoir I 94).

However, after the death of Arthur Hallam, Tennyson contemplated abandoning his writing career, and many contemporaries believed that he had because of the nearly ten years that lapsed without his publishing a single poem. However, Tennyson’s son Hallam claimed that after the death of Arthur Hallam “he came out victorious to find ‘a stronger faith his own,’ and a hope for himself, for all those in sorrow and for universal humankind, that never forsook him though the future years” (H. Tennyson, Memoir I xiv). Tennyson began experimenting with the subjects of chivalry, duty, reverence, self-control, human passion, human love, national love, science, philosophy, faith, and the nature of religion (188). In a letter to Hallam Tennyson, Aubrey de Vere noted the ways in which Tennyson’s work had evolved since the beginning of his career and how it now more fully captured the humanity and truth in these subjects and to avoid the idiosyncratic tendencies into which most modern writers lapsed. Veer stated with regard to Tennyson’s poetry:

It was the heart of England even more than her imagination that he made his own. It was the Humanities and the truths underlying them that he sang . . . Those who confer so deep a benefit cannot but be remembered.
The Heroic is not greatly appreciated in these days; but on this occasion the challenge met with a response” (189).

Furthermore, English author James Spedding, in the Edinburgh in April of 1843, complimented the poet on the changes he saw in the poet’s writing between his earlier work and that published after his hiatus:

The decade during which Mr Tennyson has remained silent has wrought a great improvement. The handling in his later pieces is much lighter and freer; the interest deeper and purer; there is more humanity with less image and drapery; a closer adherence to truth; a greater reliance for effect upon the simplicity of Nature. (H. Tennyson, Memoir I 190-91)

Tennyson became poet laureate in 1850 and was favored by Queen Victoria with peerage in 1883. He took his public position seriously. He was, above all, a poet of the people, and though he delighted in exploring his own personal concerns, he was primarily interested in them in terms of how they related to larger social and public issues. The public at that time did not always fully understand the political, social, and historical nature of his poetry. Tennyson was fully aware of this fact and frequently mentioned in letters to friends the misreadings or misinterpretations of his works by common readers and by experienced critics alike. However, in a letter to Tennyson, William Thackeray said he believed that the Idylls of the King would be better understood and admired by many of those who were incapable of fully understanding and appreciating his previous works (444). Knowing that readers had had difficulty with some of his earlier poetry, Tennyson created his Idylls in the form of an Arthurian legend, believing that the public would better receive his message this way.
Views on Social Literature and the Ideal

At the time in which Tennyson was writing, a number of authors debated literature’s place with respect to social issues. Just after Tennyson death and shortly after the release of the complete *Idylls* poem, William Clark Gordon outlined the nineteenth-century debate in the first chapter of *The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson as Related to His Time*. Throughout the text, a doctoral thesis first written in 1899, Gordon evaluated and very much supported the value of relating issues of sociology and literature and the ways in which Tennyson used literature to comment on the social issues of his time. For many authors, whether or not their works greatly influence society is of little or no concern. Victorian authors like Oscar Wilde, who coined the saying “art for art’s sake,” believed that readers could and, in most cases, should view literature independent of utilitarian purposes and that literature was in itself valuable, even if motivated by artistic ideals alone. Myriad nineteenth-century critics argued that the art of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* had suffered at the hands of his didactic agenda. The popularity of social literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth century concerned its authors: “To literature this would mean the substitution of some very poor preaching for some very good art, and it is no secret that the supply of poor preaching in the world’s market today is much greater than the demand” (Gordon 3). Furthermore, literary authors commonly agreed that, overall, didactic poetry and prose belonged to the lower stages of literary development.

While artists feared that the inclusion of didacticism in literature would lessen the artistry of their work, social reformers feared that the inclusion of the artistry of literature would diminish the validity of their work. Social reformers believed that literature was not at risk of being lowered by “the prosaic loquacity of the sociologist” but “the standards of the
sociological science by the graceless inaccuracies and watery imagining of much that purports to be literature” (Gordon 4).

As Tennyson’s poetry illustrates, he believed that though literature was independently valuable, it could be and should be used in particular situations as more than a mere expression of art. Artistry of literature benefited greatly from its incorporation of elements of social science and social science from the true representations of life that literature adds if done naturally and in accordance with truth. Gordon argued that the way in which Tennyson added social, emotional, and psychological expressions of life, turns prosaic events, facts, and deeds into relevant, real-life situations contributed to Tennyson’s success as a poet (11). Literature, he argued is a true-to-life art that provides psychological elements for which the sociologist fervently sought. It transformed stark science into life, and the social elements of literature also help transform it from sheer art into life.

Gordon claimed that successful authors of social literature should achieve three goals—which he asserted Tennyson does. Despite looking at the ways in which Tennyson did this in a number of his poems, he did not fully evaluate the way Tennyson utilizes these three elements in The Idylls of the King. The first was that they should meticulously study the past and either give or seek to give an accurate portrayal of the past in a way that illustrated how certain truths from that past persist in the present (16-18). To do so, an author must have a comprehensive knowledge of the social conditions of certain significant periods in history as well as of his or her own time and should be able to draw effective parallels between them; authors must also show the importance of the issues they address for the future. Gordon claimed that literature is one of the most effective means of calling attention to social conditions, especially their evils and the way in which such evils might be remedied
or at least avoided: “It performs this beneficent series in various ways, but especially by compelling recognition of unpleasant and hidden facts, stimulating investigation, creating public opinion, and arousing pubic conscience” (21). Literature is most serviceable, he argued, in the first stages of social reform.

The second goal that Gordon contended an author of social literature must attain was to bring society to a kind of self-consciousness by weeding out the transient concerns of the day from the more permanent and then understanding and using these conditions through imagination in a way that made even past representations seem present or contemporary (26). Being at the forefront of social reform, however, an author’s most difficult task is revealing modern truths to a society that might be either unwilling or unable to fully understand the evils being depicted in a work of literature. The author must present these facts in a way that does not wholly offend the public, because often the society is ignorant of such conditions, which are often the result of tradition and convention inherited from the past. Furthermore, people prefer not to subconsciously deny or acknowledge their individual roles in perpetuating them (27). The author’s greatest challenge is to present this information in a way that subtly informs the public. For this reason myth and legend are most useful and effectual; they wed past and present truths for public consumption in a more delicate and thus effective manner than other forms of literature.

Finally, by revealing the downfalls of a society, Gordon said an author must also offer potential solutions to problems, provide remedies for amending challenging situations, or present means by which a society or individual may bypass certain social pitfalls by promoting the highest social ideals, ideals that speak to humanity’s highest sense of perfection and support humanity’s making the best of the world it has and of itself (Gordon
According to this view, the role of the literary author is to push his or her audience, through art, toward these two ideals. Such a view of the ideal advances the idea that every age has ideals for which it must strive, ideals that change over time, and that even when or if all of these ideals are not fulfilled, the failure of one era does not mean the failure of the next: Gordon said “Every fall of the race is a fall upward . . . the individuality of every period is shown in its ideals more . . . and nowhere are those ideals more fully and definitely expressed than in literature” (33-35).

Clearly Tennyson sought to achieve, and did achieve, each of these tenets in his writing of the poem. In his poem he devoted much of his effort toward addressing the problems that he believed plagued Victorian English society, problems that he feared would, if not addressed adequately, lead the kingdom to an untimely downfall. He believed that at some point all societies fall and are replaced with new ones accordingly. Though in his poem Arthur’s kingdom falls, Tennyson had hoped that his work might address and illuminate the social evils in a way society might recognize before they were beyond remedy. Upon publishing “Maud” in 1860, Tennyson was disappointed and vexed by its initial reception. He told his son that the poem does not cry out against the [Victorian] age as hopelessly bad, but tries to point out where it is bad in order that each individual may do his best to redeem it; as the evils he denounces are individual, only to be cured by each man looking to his own heart. He denounced evil in all its shapes, especially those considered venial by the work and society. (H. Tennyson, Memoir II 468)

He looked to the past for ideas on how to remedy or allay current problems in an attempt to influence future events.
Tennyson also attempted to appeal to his audience through his promotion of the two forms of ideal to which Gordon referred. In his myth, Arthur epitomizes the highest ideal and sense of perfection of which a human, man or woman, is capable. The next most ideal character of the poem is Elaine, who represents the highest ideal for women; she is most loyal, pure, and kind. Most of Tennyson’s characters appeal to the second of Gordon’s ideals, in which humanity seeks to make the best of situations in which it finds itself. Most of the characters in Tennyson’s poem seek out elements of perfection. Launcelot, Gareth, Geraint, and Balan and Balin all actively seek out the ideal and attempt to perfect themselves, no matter how flawed.

Though they all fail to some degree, they strive for good, as do Guinevere, Lynette, Enid, and Ettarre. The only characters in the book who turn away from actively perfecting themselves are Vivien, Gawain, and Tristram. Even Pelleas, before fully embracing evil as the Red Knight, attempts to avoid it and search for good. Despite the fall of the kingdom, Tennyson constructs a poem that ends on a hopeful note. Though the members of Camelot were not able to perfect themselves enough to save the failing kingdom, their search for the ideal was not for nothing. Tennyson ends the poem looking forward to a new era, ready to replace the old, a new era which begins with a number of the realized flaws of the past righted.

In addition, by couching his tale in Arthurian myth, Tennyson was able subtly to reveal serious Victorian problems to the public. As Gordon noted, one of the greatest challenges of social literature is to reveal issues that are potentially personal and offensive to individuals and the public in a way that does not provoke backlash. Readers must first unconsciously confront such issues and then consciously confront them when they are ready
to address them adequately. Contemporary critics accused Tennyson’s Arthurian idylls of being escapist. But as Beverly Taylor points out in her study of the Idylls, Tennyson was not an escapist; he recognized the value of remoteness. By adopting a medieval setting and narrative, he believed audiences would more readily accept the work’s lessons (Taylor 24).

People frequently see into the truths of particular situations, especially confusing, complicated, or uncomfortable ones, from a distance rather than close up. It is often easier to learn from others’ mistakes or accomplishments than from one’s own. For these reasons, Tennyson purposely presented his readers with real-world predicaments characteristic of Victorian society through a distant legendary Arthurian society. Poet John Payne claimed that he “owed his popularity mainly to the way in which he pandered to the weaknesses of the intellectually lower classes and to his cunning fashion of adorning the idealizing the grossest gospel of disguised materialism and crass optimism” (Tillotson 288). Ironically, it was this optimism and appeal to idealism in his Idylls that made this work popular with that masses but unpopular with his literary contemporaries.

Finally, Tennyson was a man keenly aware of the perpetual truths that ran through the histories of different eras, truths that connected the past to the present and the past and present to the future. Gordon claimed that great social literature should reflect not only the time in which it is written, but all times (44); Tennyson’s Idylls does just that. The Idylls is a poem that blends past, present, and future by locating essential truths, which do not disappear over time but merely change situationally. When Tennyson was writing his poem, he was writing primarily for nineteenth-century Victorian England, but he was also writing for the past and for the future. By using an Arthurian myth, a myth that both embodies time
and denies it, he created a work that constructs a continuous conversation between past, present, and future.

Twentieth and twenty-first century critics continue to evaluate the social nature of Tennyson’s poetry, many focusing on his *Idylls*, and of the Victorian poets as a whole. Many no longer argue the *Idylls* were as successful as Gordon might have purported, but most also agree that it was not the failure some of Tennyson’s contemporaries argued it was. Much of the debate at the turn of the twentieth century focused on the different means by which Carlyle and Tennyson used to approach social, political, and cultural issues. James Knowles in “Aspects of Tennyson” claims that Tennyson “had the tenderest thought and hope for all men” unlike Carlyle “whose open rage with mankind was glaring” (131). Michael Timko, similarly, notes that, unlike Carlyle, Tennyson refused to give into despair; Tennyson believed that mankind was “rational” and had full ability to mediate itself, institution, and society (65). Despite humankind’s propensity to act as beasts, Tennyson believed good laid beneath the surface of most deplorable action, and in this was hope for humanity.

Timko, like Gordon, claims that Tennyson did not believe in “useless Aestheticism” in his attempts to produce “the kind of writing that would convert man’s perception of the world round him,” a kind of writing which Timko calls “oblique insinuation.” Tennyson, unlike Carlyle, offered soft “solutions” through art instead of harsh “confrontation” and “challenge” (185). These solutions, Timko contends, were best delivered in the for of an idyll, a poetic form which Sir Charles Tennyson stated that Tennyson turned to when “he was able to look at the world with more serenity and detachment,” a form Tennyson felt appealed most to the hearts of his readers about the religious, political, and social matters of their lives and of their times (189).
While Timko mentions the difference between Carlyle and Tennyson’s approaches to the individual and to society in his work, Claire M. Berardini focuses not only on the difference in these two author’s views of humanity, but also on the authors’ opposing views of individuality and community, which she claims are rooted in these views. Throughout the Victorian age, many poets’ careers focused on questions of individuality and individual agency and the effects individual people had on social structures (81). She claims Tennyson’s works investigated how individual subjectivities form and the ways in which individuals act within the social communities that form them. By doing so, he developed a number of poetic forms, some seemingly post-structural, that tested the limits of the individual and Victorian political and social structures: “As the ‘poet of his age,’ Tennyson’s career bears the burdens and complexities of an age often urgently confronting questions of individual agency, questions which shaped themselves in a variety of ways: Class mobility, the constant threat of organized social resistance and even anarchy, the ‘woman’s question,’ and gender . . .” (95). Anthony H. Harrison, in *Victorian Poets and the Politics of Culture: Discourse and Ideology*, further investigates and directly explains the ways in which structural theory applies to Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*.

Twenty-first century criticism has begun focusing less on the content of the individual poems of Tennyson and his contemporaries in relationship to social, cultural, and political issues and more on the rhetoric of the poetry and how authors used it to do so. In *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique* E. Warwick Slinn reevaluates the connection between poetry, culture, and social discourse. He focuses on the “act” of writing poetry and its performative nature, looking to Austin, Derrida, McGann, and de Man for support. Poetry, he argues absorbs the language of idealism and exposes idealist ideological assumptions (4).
By reading poetry, individuals see the ways in which “identity, power, and ideology” interact and how “cultural meaning, individual subjectively and social authority are brought into being” (7). In his essay on Victorian poetry, Slinn claims:

“The Idylls stood for a long time as the monumental achievement of the Victorian indirection, constructing from the medieval materials of Arthurian legend an epic vision of Britain’s imperial splendor and internal decline. As Arthur’s impossible morality fails to sustain the Round table, the poem transforms Tennyson’s repeated theme of loss into a symbolic mythos of changing order” (“Poetry,” Slinn 320)

THE ARTHURIAN MYTH AS RECURSIVE, APPROPRIATIVE, AND CONTEMPORARY

In his study of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and Arthurian legendry, J. M. Gray comments on the nature of myth building: “As tradition is undermined, new myths arise or the old are reworked to reflect new conditions. Myth cannot date” (1). This comment rings particularly true in the case of Tennyson’s Arthurian masterpiece. Above all, Tennyson’s poem is his re-handling of Arthurian myth. Over the *Idylls’* one hundred years in print as a completed work, scholars have considered the work an epic, an idyll and/or a collection of idylls, and a romance.

For the purpose of this study, it is most effective to view the work as individual idylls, which function both dependently and independently of one another as a part of Tennyson’s re-articulation of the ongoing Arthurian myth cycle. Tennyson’s idylls take on the form of a traditional Alexandrian idyll, as defined by H. M. McLuhan; they contain
“ritualistic form, great erudition, artistic sophistication, obscurity, concentration of allusion and expression, discontinuity, flashbacks, digressions, subplots, dramatic parallelism, multileveled implications, and symbolic analogy” (Gray 2). Tennyson, by composing his work in idyll form, gave himself the freedom to reinterpret the myth as its meaning consistently changed for him and for Victorian England over the period of time in which it was composed and published. The myth changed not only over large spans of time but over shorter ones as well; Tennyson even went so far as to make it mutable over the course of Victorian era. It is the Arthurian legend’s ability to change situationally that ultimately led to its transformation from mere history to legend and finally to myth.

Tennyson consciously structured his *Idylls of the King* to resemble the structure of the Arthurian myth as a whole. In his construction of the poem, he attempted to demonstrate two elements about the Arthurian legend. First, he illustrated the overall structure the myth had taken historically by emphasizing linear and periodic movements within each idyll and over the span of the entire poem. Second, he illustrated the recursive nature of the Arthurian legend by emphasizing systems of continual circular and rotational motion. By doing these two things, Tennyson revealed why every Arthurian tale is contemporary and why the myth is and will always be valid.

While most Arthurian legends written before Tennyson were reflections of the times and places within which they originated, few had openly acknowledged them as being so. No author before Tennyson had acknowledged his or her indebtedness to the historical, structural, and narrative nature of the Arthurian myth. Taylor explains that by joining the medieval narrative and its modern frame, Tennyson created both a cyclical concept of
history that implies that mankind may learn from the past and a contemporary literature capable of providing guidance to readers (26).

Thoroughly acquainted with the legend and its function from the medieval period to his own, Tennyson manipulated the myth in his retelling of it with the purpose of illustrating the myth’s cyclical and timeless structure. He imitated the structure of the myth in the structure of his idylls. By intently studying past Arthurian works, he evaluated the myth’s continual interpretation and reinterpretation by different authors as it pertained to different societies, cultures, and times. Hallam notes, “From his earliest years he had written out in prose various histories of Arthur.” He continues:

> On Malory, and later, on Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of the Mabinogion, and on his own imagination, my father said that he chiefly founded his epic; he has made the old legends his own . . . infused into them a spirit of modern thought . . . as indeed otherwise these archaic stories would not have appealed to the modern world at large. (121-22)

Hallam Tennyson wrote in his Memoir how his father had written out prose versions of the various histories and tales of Arthur, from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Malory to Guest’s translation of the Mabinogion (Memoir II 121). The way in which he serially composed and published his idylls and the overall structure of the poems in their initial groupings and in their completed form imitated the structural and narrative nature of the Arthurian myth.

Idylls of the King is cyclical in its design. As John Pfordresher notes in A Variorum Edition of Tennyson’s Idylls of the King, Tennyson published his idylls in increments of four or fewer idylls at a time, and years apart. Though he began experimenting with and roughly sketching and composing the first of his idylls in 1830, he did not publish his first Arthurian
idyll, “The Epic,” until 1842. The first fifty-one lines of the “The Epic” initially introduce “Morte d'Arthur” and its last eight lines close the work. The first group of idylls, “Enid,” “Vivien,” “Elaine,” and Guinevere,” appeared in 1859 under the title The True and the False: Four Idylls of the King, later shortened by editors to Idylls of the King. He first released his dedication to the late Prince Albert as a pamphlet in 1862. Finally, he published the second group of four idylls, “The Coming of Arthur,” “The Holy Grail,” “Pelleas and Ettarre,” and “The Passing of Arthur,” in 1869 under the title The Holy Grail, Etc.

Tennyson published all of his previously published idylls and dedication in 1871 under the title Idylls of the King. “The Last Tournament” appeared alone as a periodical in the Contemporary Review and again with “Gareth and Lynette” and the epilogue, “To the Queen,” in 1872 as Gareth and Lynette, Etc. Tennyson did not publish the final idyll, “Balin and Balan” until 1885. In 1886, all appeared together as the complete poem Idylls of the King (Pfordresher 33-55). He thus took nearly thirty years to complete the completion of this creation and sixty years to complete its publication.

Though this is the order in which Tennyson published his idylls, it was not the order in which he composed them. The first idyll he composed was “Morte d’Arthur,” which he later renamed “The Passing of Arthur.” Scholars believe he began it in 1833 after the tragic death of his best friend, Arthur Hallam, because the first drafts of this poem lay cushioned in a notebook, in his notes for In Memoriam (Rosenberg, “Elegy” 73). He began writing “Merlin and Nimue,” later “Viviene” and then “Vivien and Merlin,” in 1843 while on a trip.

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4 Under this first title, Tennyson comments on the faithfulness of these women; Enid is true; Vivian is false; Elaine is true; and Guinevere is false. With these women, Tennyson sets up another cycle in his idylls based on the faithfulness of some women and the deceit of others. Tennyson first introduces Enid who is true, followed by Vivien who is false, followed by Elaine who is true, and finally Guinevere who is false. In the final version of the poem, these women remain in this order but spaced throughout the work.
through Ireland and finished it in February of 1856. He began “Enid,” later “Geraint and Enid,” in April of that same year and finished it by September; On May 6, 1857, he wrote his wife, telling her its final proof sheets had been sent to London (Pfordresher 27). While writing “Enid,” Tennyson began “Guinevere,” and on July 9, 1856, he gave his wife the first two lines of the poem as a birthday present: “But hither shall I never come again, / Never lie by thy side; see thee no more; / Farwell!” In early 1858, he told friends it had only taken him “a fortnight” to compose (H. Tennyson, Memoir I 414). That same year, he informed his wife of his plans for “The Maid of Astolat,” later “Elaine,” and then “Elaine and Lancelot,” and finished it by February of the next year (31).

In December 1861, Tennyson momentarily interrupted the writing of his idylls to address the death of his good friend the Prince Consort, composing a dedication in honor of Prince Albert just after his death. Such an interruption was fitting because the Prince had admired the work greatly, and Tennyson based his Arthur on the Prince (H. Tennyson, Memoir I 486). The next idyll Tennyson composed was “The Holy Grail.” Though Tennyson avoided writing a Grail poem after The Duke of Argyll suggested it to him as subject material in 1858, Hallam Tennyson notes that his mother wrote in her diary that Tennyson commenced his Quest for the Sangraal in 1868; he completed it by September and composed it over about a week’s time (H. Tennyson, Memoir I 457). In the winter of 1869 he embarked on “The Coming of Arthur” and “Pelleas and Ettarre” and had finished them both by 1870. During this time he also amended parts of the original “Morte d’Arthur,” renaming it “The Passing of Arthur.” He added his final lines to this idyll in late 1885.

Tennyson began work on “Beaumains,” later “Sir Gareth,” on October 16, 1869, but he set it aside to work on his next idyll (Pfordresher 47). Emily Tennyson notes that though
her husband had worked on the ideas for “The Last Tournament” as early as mid-1859, he did not finish the story of Tristram in this idyll until May of 1871. Tennyson finished “Sir Gareth” in July of 1872 alongside his “Epilogue” to the Queen, which he finished in December (41-47). The last idyll he composed was “Balin and Balan,” as noted in his journals and letters in 1872 but did not complete until much later; he intended the idyll as an introduction to “Vivien and Merlin” (H. Tennyson, Memoir II 134). His final addition to the poem as a whole was in 1891, to “To the Queen,” to which he added the lines “Ideal manhood closed in real man” (l. 38).

Finally, he arranged the idylls of his complete poem in an order different from that of either his composition or publication orders. He must have had a reason for arranging them in the manner he did. It is hard to believe that a man who put such thought into the order in which he published his idylls would not put as much consideration into the final form of his poem. He arranged the idylls in the final poem from “The Coming of Arthur,” to “Gareth and Lynette,” “The Marriage of Geraint,” “Geraint and Enid,” “Balin and Balan,” “Merlin and Vivien,” “Lancelot and Elaine,” “The Holy Grail,” “Pelleas and Ettarre,” “The Last Tournament,” “Guinevere,” and “The Passing of Arthur.” Tennyson enclosed his full poem between his “Dedication” to Albert, Prince Consort, and the epilogue for Queen Victoria, “To the Queen.” Since Tennyson’s primary objectives for writing his Idylls were that the work be a commentary on the Victorian age, a warning against corruption, and a guide on how to achieve the highest ideals, it makes perfect narrative sense that he would couch his main idylls between these two introductory and closing idylls dedicated to England’s leaders.
At the time Tennyson was writing, parts of the English empire were collapsing, primarily it colonial holdings, and Victoria’s activity in governmental and national politics was becoming less. Tennyson might have included the first and last idylls to assuage any resentments the Queen might have felt toward him and the idylls because of the national flaws he publically addresses within the work or simply to draw attention to the subtle political, social, and moral elements he included throughout the poem. For example, a close reading of the “Epilogue” reveals Tennyson’s apprehensions regarding England’s future. For whatever reason Tennyson began and ended his work with these two poems, the two idylls highlight the contemporary elements Tennyson included in this work and the modern-day goals he hoped to achieve through his retelling of the historic myth. Tennyson couched his Arthurian poem between two poems about Victorian England to continually remind readers that it is a medieval work about Victorian England.

As J. M. Gray points out in Thro’ the Vision of the Night, logically, when an author distributes his work in pieces but ultimately intends these pieces to form a larger whole—as Tennyson clearly planned—he embeds unifying threads within each independent piece that carry through the work's entirety, threads that add cohesion to the overall work (1-9). Tennyson undoubtedly had a final vision for his idylls and intended it to be a cohesive whole, but as Robert Patten notes in his essay “The Contemporaneity of The Last Tournament,” in interpretations of the poem, most critics only consider the Idylls as a complete work, silently unifying the seemingly disparate elements that appeared out of sequence from the introduction of “Morte d’Arthur” through “Balin and Balan” (262). Patton’s quotes Ledbetter to exemplify his belief that the poem must be studied in its parts in order to understand Tennyson’s complex vision of the Arthurian myth: “A Tennyson
A poem published in a Victorian periodical engages readers with meanings that are different from those embedded in the same poem published in a book volume” (268). Only when considered as a whole and recognized as a whole of individual idylls, published independently over many years, does the work reveal its true structural and narrative intentions.

Tennyson’s string of pearls metaphor in “Vivien and Merlin.” best articulates the two aspects of the Arthurian myth he wished to illustrate in his *Idylls*. The first is the mutability of the Arthurian myth, which makes it applicable to any era:

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this rhyme

Is like the fair pearl-necklace of the Queen
That burst in dancing, and the pearls were spilt;
Some lost, some stolen, some as relics kept.
But nevermore the same two sister pearls
Ran down the silken thread to kiss each other
On her white neck—so it is with this rhyme:
It lives dispersedly in many hands
And every minstrel sings it differently;
Yet is there one true line, the pearl of pearls. (ll. 448-57)
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The string of pearls represents the history of the Arthurian myth; each individual pearl represents a different one of the eras in which an author applied the myth. Each individual story, though written for a different purpose and for a different audience, is a part of the long line of Arthurian legends that made the myth what it was and still is.
In _Ideologies of Epic_, Colin Graham focuses on the last two lines of the metaphor, claiming that the “truth” of the line is the tradition as contemporary address: “‘beginnings’ and ‘peak times’ are transferred through history as and by narrativity. But their textual existence is turned into cultural revelation by _Idylls of the King_—they become the ‘true line’ through Tennyson, as a voice speaking authoritatively to his age out of the sanctity of tradition” (54). The two final lines of the passage emphasize the way in which each author and his or her story tell the tale of a particular time. Tennyson is the minstrel for nineteenth-century England.

Tennyson positions his Arthurian legend in one of these points in time, the Victorian era. In _The Fall of Camelot_, John D. Rosenberg notes the radical change that humanity’s sense of time underwent during the Victorian age. He explains that in his _Idylls_, Tennyson created a cycle of generations, not just of a single person or single generation. During the Victorian era, the English people used the word “change” as the term that broadly defined England's rapidly shifting religious, economic, social, and cultural ideologies. Within the _Idylls of the King_’s temporal cycle, Tennyson captures but one cycle, the Victorian cycle, a cycle that at the time was incomplete. Reed states that Tennyson’s narrative itself becomes a means of solving problems of dissolution and decay.

Henry Kozicki too points out in “A Dialectic of History in Tennyson’s 'Idylls'” that the poem "contains 'an allegory of the collapse of society,' a 'cyclical view of history,' and the 'doctrine regarding history as an organic growth’” (141). Kozicki claims that in his _Idylls_, Tennyson depicts how individuals are responsible for injuring societies and collectively cause the organic rise and fall of societies and that people determine the time in which it takes society to rise and fall within a given cycle (Kozicki 142).
The figure of Arthur, no matter how large or small his role in a particular work, provides authors with a constant line of reference, the “truth,” which runs through the individual Arthurian tales and the overall mythology from the first stories through those told in the twenty-first century. The secondary characters and community, “the minstrel’s song,” form transient spaces of time within which authors may manipulate and rearticulate their Arthurian narrative to suit the time and the circumstances within which they write. Tennyson maintained that his *Idylls* illustrated the maintenance of the greatest good (Arthur), despite the cyclical ups and downs (the knights of the Round Table and Camelot) of particular times.

Patten claims that Tennyson published “The Last Tournament” in a periodical to openly voice public concerns he had regarding Victorian England: “Tennyson may well have found the periodical’s principal concerns about contemporary events to chime with the always morphing but always centrally grounded structures of his Arthurian saga” (Patten 268). As Patten explains, by producing and publishing serially, Tennyson developed a closeness between himself and the reader, which in a sense made the reader a part of the writing process and the poem’s construction, an affect which in turn made the poems contemporary (Patton 268). What inspired Tennyson to write his idylls in the 1830s was not what inspired him to write his later idylls (262). In each decade within which he composed and published, different elements of Victorian society moved him to develop his idylls in a different way. Looking at the myth again through Tennyson’s string of pearls metaphor, it is as though there are pearls within pearls. The Arthurian myth is a multilayered structure whose structure is versatile enough that it can be interpreted and reinterpreted not only in different eras but within the same era. Through the serial publication of his individual idylls,
Tennyson was readily able to make comments regarding Victorian society in a way that urged his reading public to look more deeply into the social issues.

Just as every Arthurian tale was inspired by the time and environment within which it was written, each of Tennyson’s idyls was inspired by the time and environment within which it was written. And just as each Arthurian tale can stand alone but is made stronger when viewed in conjunction with the others, each tale of the idyls of the full poem can stand alone but is made stronger when viewed in conjunction with the others. Since Tennyson wrote his idylls over such a long period, a time he noted as being racked with rapid change, the cultural topics he wished to address in each idyll also changed. Patten explains the benefit of reading the poem in its parts and as contemporary pieces: “When we ask how these different interventions in the poem occurred and what events in the poetic inheritance and current history they responded to, we will begin to appreciate in new registers the architecture of the poem that variously structures all its parts” (262).

What was wholly fresh about the method Tennyson used to compose his work was that he recognized the structure of the Arthurian myth and used it in a way that reflected bit just a particular time in history, the Victorian period, but also crucial spots of time within that period. By publishing his idylls as he wrote them, he write not to a past but to a present. As Patten notes, each idyll was one “whose ‘content’ Tennyson could invent” as a means of conversing with contemporary Britain about the issues vexing it (260). Ann Colley suggests that Tennyson published the idyll “The Last Tournament” alone and in a well-read magazine because there he wanted to bring a number of issues to the attention of the public, for the sake of public health.
In the late 1860s, at a meeting held by the Metaphysical Society, he had addressed a number of pressing issues he believed concerned Victorian England; some of these topics were “madness, the credibility of dreams, the possibility of immorality, and the relationship between science and the supernatural” (Patten 265). Though he did not enjoy publishing his work in journals, primarily because it opened his poems up to the kind of negative criticism he both abhorred and found distasteful and disheartening (Memoir I 95-97, 122), he published “The Last Tournament” in the *Contemporary Review* in 1871. Tennyson clearly had topics he felt he should address publically, and as a socially conscious individual, he published his idyll about the fall of a mighty kingdom—a fall related to many of the problems he formerly addressed—in a popular, well-respected, and well-read journal. “The Last Tournament” was the only idyll Tennyson published in a magazine, but by publishing his other idylls serially every few years, he publically address the most pressing issues concerning contemporary England.

Each of the idylls tells a unique Arthurian story that can stand alone or in line with the others, and though the idylls are frequently viewed as a complete piece, each idyll alone is in itself complete and significant. For this reason, it is most useful to view Tennyson’s *Idylls* as a cycle of idylls, especially when evaluating the form of the work in reference to the history and form of Arthurian myth. David Staines describes the structure of Tennyson’s poem as ten idylls and two framing idylls as a series of related panels that revolve around one central figure, King Arthur. He claims that Tennyson created a group of independent tales in the manner of the medieval tradition, with a fixed beginning and end and an ever-expanding middle (84). Each section is an individual and independent work that can stand alone or in line with the other sections of the cycle. Furthermore, Staines compares this structure of
both independent and dependent idylls to the “medieval cycle” of Arthurian tales. a cycle that catalogues parts, sections that build upon one another ultimately to form a full picture.

Staines, however, insists that Tennyson composed this structure unconsciously from his close association with the myths and that he and his contemporaries did not appreciate the unique structure of the medieval cycle. It seems implausible that Tennyson, so well acquainted with the former Arthurian myths and self-conscious of the publication about his idylls, was unconscious of the structure of his poem imitating this form, especially when he used it in the number of ways that he did throughout the poem. Again, his string of pearls metaphor is a clue that he was conscious of the form of the Arthurian myth. Tennyson’s idylls function in the same manner in his *Idylls* as the medieval tales do in the medieval cycles. Arthur is the line that runs through or the subject that connects all of the medieval tales of the medieval Arthurian cycle just as he is the connecting force among the idylls of *Idylls of the King*. Each medieval work tells the story of a particular time, just as each idyll tells the story of a particular time during the Victorian era. Finally, the *Idylls*, in their completion, form one of the tales, the story of the Victorian era, in the whole of the Arthurian cycle, which includes all of the tales told about Arthur throughout the history of the myth.

**TEMPORAL CYCLES: BIRTH, DEATH, AND REBIRTH**

Throughout *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson incorporates a number of temporal cycles. These cycles serve as unifying threads that weave all of the idylls together; His repetition of these cycles and ideas creates structural unity. Tennyson's incorporation of motion through the past, present, and future by means of both independent and interdependent seasonal or annual, diurnal, and maturational cycles constructs a complete narrative structure for his poem. However, his structure not only provides the poem with a form but also casts the
poem in a way that suits his overall vision of purpose for his version of the Arthurian legend, a vision that promotes death and decay through certain movements within the text but ultimately promotes the continual cycles of life and time toward rebirth and new beginnings. Tennyson illustrates the cyclical nature of the Arthurian legend to show the eternal nature of the myth through cycles of death and rebirth.

**Seasonal and Diurnal Cycles**

The temporal cycle that is most obvious in Tennyson's work is seasonal. Tennyson portrays Arthur's life as taking place over the course of a symbolic seasonal year. A number of seasonal cycles take place throughout *Idylls*: Arthur's life cycle, the span of his reign, and the rise and collapse of his kingdom. Though Tennyson does not explicitly say in what month Arthur is born, he describes him as being born on the night of the New Year, so born in winter ("The Coming of Arthur" ll.210-11). The king of Cameliard also refers to Arthur's secret birth and unknown heritage in terms of seasonal imagery: he says to Merlin, "A doubtful throne is ice on summer seas" (l. 247). Tennyson depicts Arthur's kingship as taking place primarily in the summer; as Arthur ages, the text moves from summer into autumn. Tennyson also changes the season of Arthur's death from summer, as it appears in Malory, to winter: "And there, that day when the great light of heaven / Burned at his lowest in the rolling year" (ll. 91-92). Furthermore, Bedivere, seeing the barge move away from him and toward Avalon—where the King claims he will heal his grievous wounds—mourns, "But when the moan had past for evermore, / The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn /Amazed him, and he groan'd, "The King is gone"" (ll. 441-43).

Tennyson begins Arthur's reign in the idyll "The Coming of Arthur" with his coronation as king in early spring and his establishment of the Round Table: "and Arthur sat
Crown'd on the dais, and his warriors cried, / 'Be thou the king, and we will work thy will / Who love thee" (ll. 356-59). Similarly, his meeting Guinevere and his marriage to her takes place in blossoming spring:

The stateliest of her altar-shrines, the king
That morn was married, while in stainless white,
The fair beginners of a nobler time,
And glorying in their vow and him, his knights
Stood round him, and rejoicing in his joy.
Far shone the fields of May thro' open door,
The sacred altar blossom'd white with May,
The Sun of May descended on their King.

("The Coming of Arthur" ll. 444-61)

Arthur is crowned king, takes a queen, the Fairy King and Fairy Queen build the great city of Camelot, and the King establishes the Round Table in spring. As John D. Rosenberg notes, each cycle in its foundations and rise is pregnant with its fall ("Elegy," 41); thus, Arthur's marriage scene ends on the line "the sun of May descended on their king" ("The Coming of Arthur" l. 61). Tennyson portrays the rise of the King, he also alludes to his inevitable fall. Nevertheless, just as every ascent implies a descent, Tennyson's use of a seasonal cycle reminds readers that every descent implies ascent. Spring must give way to summer, summer to autumn, and autumn to winter, but winter must ultimately give way to another spring; out of death and endings, rebirth and new beginnings emerge.

As Arthur's reign and his kingdom grow in strength, their ascents parallel the sun's diurnal and seasonal cycles; the beginning idylls, which depict Arthur's rise, are "bathed in
light, sun, and warmth, whereas the later idylls, which narrate Arthur's fall, are "shrouded in darkness," shadow, and cold (Rosenberg, “Camelot” 44). He notes that the beginning of Arthur's reign, which Tennyson depicts in the early idylls of the poem, takes place in the morning hours of spring; takes place at the height of the King's reign, in the poem's middle idylls, in the noon hours of summer; and the decline of the kingdom and its king, is narrated in the final idylls, in the late evenings of autumn. Tennyson sets "Last Tournament" in fall and "Guinevere" and "The Passing of Arthur" in the dark of winter (ll. 43-44). In the final idylls, as Arthur boards the barge, Bedivere describes the state of the kingdom to his dying king, which he describes in dark and wintery terms:

For now I see the true old times are dead,
When every morning brought a noble chance
And every chance brought out a noble knight . . .
But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
Which was an image of the mighty world,
And I, the last, go forth companionless,
And the days darken round me, and the years.

("The Passing of Arthur" ll. 397-99, 402-5)

Rosenberg further reiterates the ways in which death is associated with the diurnal and seasonal cycles of winter: "as Arthur's impending doom comes ever closer, the symbolic season advances with dramatic suddenness, in consonance with our actual experiencing of shortening days and lengthening nights as the year approaches its end" (“Camelot” 56).

Tennyson's cycles function both independently and interdependently; it is difficult to discuss one cycle without touching upon another, such as Tennyson's cycles of
seasonal/annual and diurnal time. Seasons frequently mirror times of day. Over the course of a seasonal year Arthur is born and establishes his kingdom (early winter / year’s beginning); the kingdom, his kingship, and his court grow in fame, splendor, and renown (spring); Arthur’s world maintains its grandeur for a time (summer); the kingdom as a whole begins to experience and succumb to moral, ethical, and societal decay (autumn); and the damage to the kingdom is irreparable as it moves from its zenith to its nadir and collapses (dead of / end of winter). However, the last line of the poem does not depict a state of wintery, ice-cold despair but promises a new year bringing with it sun, light, and hope. As the King vanishes into light and the poem closes, "the new sun rose bringing the new year" ("The Passing of Arthur” l. 469). A new dawn emerges from darkness and a new year from the one just passed.

In the epilogue, “To the Queen,” Tennyson again urges continuation. Tennyson paints a picture of the Prince Consort, who on his deathbed, “pale” and “fever-worn,” “pluck’d his flickering life again / From halfway down the shadow of the grave” (ll. 4-6) and implores Britain in spirit not to give up but to continue forward on its path toward limitless greatness. Only when the people of Britain lose faith in themselves do they and their nation fall completely and fail absolutely. Tennyson pled with the queen to take from this ancient story what she can and asks that she not view the work as a story about total collapse:

For one who I made it o’er his grave

Sacred, accept his old imperfect tale,

New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,

Ideal manhood closed in real man,

Rather than that gray king, whose name, a ghost,
Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak,
And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still.” (ll. 37-41).

Though England has experienced yet another rise and fall, another rise is on the horizon if humanity continues to push forward and strive for excellence under the guidance of a strong leader. Arthur, like the dead Prince, though gone, is still very much present in spirit; both Alfred and Arthur ever permeate the English countryside. Even in the darkest of times, with “the tempest” looming in the distance, hope is present, and, like Arthur, the people call upon it and look to it when they most need it.

**Linear Time**

Though it is difficult to calculate the linear time in which the whole of *Idylls* occurs because of the idylls’ continual motion forward and backward through time, W. M. Maccallum first provided readers with a scheme by which approximate the number of years within which particular idylls and sequences of idylls span; using this scheme, he calculated around twelve years (423-28). Arthur found the diamond, which he hands out yearly in the Diamond Tournament, shortly before he was crowned King and established the Round Table. Next, if Arthur held a tournament each year from his founding of the Round Table, and if Lancelot holds eight diamonds, one diamond having been awarded to him yearly for winning the annual joust, then the idyll "Lancelot and Elaine," in which the ninth and final Diamond Tournament occurs, must take place between the eight and tenth years of Arthur's reign. The years between "Lancelot and Elaine" and the last idylls as two years. The search for the Holy Grail occurs over the course of a year, "a twelvemonth and a day quest" ("The Holy Grail" l.197), and the final four idylls, "Pelleas and Ettarre" through "The Passing of

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5 Though McCallum was the first to calculate the linear timeline of *Idylls*, Rosenberg later improved upon it in *Carlyle and the Burden of History*. 
Arthur," cover one year's time (ll.55-56). By constructing his *Idylls* over twelve years, reminiscent of the twelve months in a year, Tennyson incorporates a yet another cycle into his work, but does so without while permitting his audience to lose sight of time as a linear progression, movement through a past, present, and future.

Tennyson appears to assign his work a linear time frame in which the number of years that transpire match the number of idylls written. Tennyson might have done this to emphasize the independent, miniature episodes contained within the works. Each idyll, like a year, has a definitive opening and closing and is in itself an independent and definitive space of time; nonetheless, though a year and its events can be viewed as a whole, a year is commonly seen as a part of a larger history, which when viewed retrospectively and/or in conjunction with other years reveal a much larger and more clearly defined picture, much like Tennyson’s idylls and poem of idylls.

The poem gives the impression of taking a much greater period of time because Tennyson uses flashbacks, told by narrative characters, within tales to fill in details from past events. Beverly Taylor points out, that this form of narration makes past events seem as though they are occurring side by side and simultaneously with present events; “Tennyson conveys most of the action through innovative use of flashbacks and of story-within-story techniques, thus giving past events a similarly static and symbolic character” (92). “The Coming of Arthur” begins with Arthur visiting the king of Camelaird, but intermittently jumps backward to the death of Uther and the birth of Arthur; the king’s rise to power is told through stories conveyed by Bedivere, Bellicent, and Bleys. Tennyson also uses this technique in the idyll “Gareth and Lynette”; the idyll begins with Gareth as a grown man, asking to travel to Arthur’s court in hope of becoming a knight, but Tennyson continually
revisits the past by detailing episodes of Gareth’s childhood and adolescence. By placing past and present side by side, especially in these idylls that are aimed toward the future events—Arthur becoming King of Camelot and Gareth a knight in Arthur’s court—Tennyson calls attention to his poem’s indebtedness to the past tales, and present tales, to future ones; the continuous interaction, between past, present, and future is historical as well as narrative within Arthurian myth.

**Maturational Cycles**

In *Idylls of the King*, the nouns “child,” “youth,” “man,” “manhood,” and “elder” and the adjectives “young” and “old” frequently accompany Tennyson’s character descriptions. Tennyson's emphasis on age and maturation processes adds one more temporal cycle to the structure of his poem. Though a number of scholars have studied the other temporal cycles in the poem, none has examined and analyzed the cycle of maturation that occurs throughout the idylls. In the poem, Tennyson narrates the maturation of some characters over the course of the work, while others’ maturation takes place entirely within a single poem or two or more idylls. Similarly, Tennyson depicts the entire maturation processes of just a few characters, their experience moving from the time of their births through their deaths, while he merely details others' progress through more significant stages of maturation, such as from boyhood to manhood or from being knighted into old age.

Tennyson depicts Arthur as a figure whose maturation occurs over the course of his lifetime, from his birth to his death, or, more accurately, to his movement to Avalon. Though the text does not detail his development from childhood through boyhood, knighthood, kingship, and old age, his life begins in the first idyll, which details his conception, birth, and marriage to his queen, then moves through his kingship in the middle
idylls, and documents his old age, decay, and presumed death in the final three idylls. In "The Coming of Arthur," Arthur is born on the night his father dies:

  King Uther died himself,
  Moaning and wailing for an heir to rule
  After him, lest the realm should go to wrack
  And that same night, the night of the new year.
  By reason of the bitterness and grief
  That vexed his mother, all before his time
  Was Arthur born, and all as soon as born
  Deliver'd at a secret postern-gate
  To Merlin, to be holden far apart
  Until his hour should come. ("The Coming of Arthur" ll. 205-14)

For fear that the fierce warring lords might harm Arthur, Merlin gives the baby to his friends to raise: “Wherefore Merlin took the child / And gave him to Sir Anton, an old knight /
And ancient friend of Uther; and his wife / Nursed the young prince, and rear'd him with her own" (ll. 221-23). Tennyson does not depict Arthur's transition from “child” to “adult”; it is not until England is in need of a great king that Arthur reappears. "Merlin thro' his craft, / And while the people clamour'd for a king, / Had Arthur crown'd" (ll. 232-35). The narrative moves from Arthur as being a “child” directly to “king” as if no maturation were needed; Arthur does not mature from child to king, because one presumes he was destined to be king at birth, being the son of Uther.

For the remainder of the poem Tennyson refers to Arthur as “old.” The last time Tennyson describes him as youthful is in "Balin and Balan" when Arthur's baron approaches
the king about two strange knights. Arthur calls the baron "Old friend" and tells him he is "too old to be so young" (ll. 14-5); Arthur too feels the effects of age. But, in a moment of feeling youthful, Arthur seeks out the knights and defeats them: "early, one fair dawn, / The light-wing'd spirit of his youth return'd / On Arthur's heart" ("Balin and Balan" ll. 18-20). In this situation, Arthur's absence of "youth" (or the rare return of its feeling to him) emphasizes the "youth" of the court. For Tennyson, old age does not imply weakness and should not be despised; old age implies experience and wisdom. On the other hand "youth" implies innocence or, at times, ignorance. From this point forward in the poem, while the court navigates numerous perilous situations and confronts sin, most giving into temptation at some point, Arthur remains steadfast in his beliefs and serves as a representative for the kingdom’s most honorable ideals.

In "Lancelot and Elaine," Guinevere tells Lancelot that her husband is a child, "a moral child without craft to rule" (ll. 145-46), and chastises him for his unrealistic expectations for her and her court, expectations they cannot live up to. Arthur’s old age renders him infantile in Guinevere's mind because she is flawed and does not yet understand the innocence and goodness inherent in her husband. Though it seems she is deeming him by reducing him to an immature and an infantile state, she says he is childish because he expects too much from her and the court; these expectations point toward his wisdom and his adherence to the ideal, traits that are honorable. Tennyson moves Arthur back to infancy for two reasons; by having Guinevere compare Arthur to a child, Tennyson comments on his failure as a ruler effectively to implement the ideal into his kingdom and the end of his reign and by reducing him to a child he alludes to new birth and points toward the birth of the new era ready to replace the old: “The first Aurelius lived and fought and died, / And
after him King Uther fought and died, / But either fail’d to make the kingdom one. / And
after these King Arthur for a space” (“Coming of Arthur,” ll. 12-16). The fall of one king
always ushers in the new reign of the next.

Though age implies wisdom in the first half of the poem, by the end of the work
Tennyson also uses old age to imply death. In "The Last Tournament," when Arthur
approaches one of his knights of the Round Table hanging from "a grim dead tree before a
tower," for him, it is as if his youth and honorable days of being king hang from that tree,
swinging by the neck ("The Last Tournament” ll. 430-32). The king and his court are in their
final stages of life; the vitality of youth and the power of middle age have passed. But as the
earlier idylls remind readers, death does not imply termination.

In the first idylls, Arthur's maturation from youth to king mirrors the establishment
and ascension of his kingdom; in the central idylls, the king, secure in his prime and at his
most powerful, reflects the stability and strength of his court, and in the last three idylls,
"The Last Tournament," "Guinevere," and "The Passing of Arthur," the king’s movement
from middle age to old age parallels the passing of his kingdom. However, by intertwining
the concept of old age with both wisdom and passing, Tennyson reaffirms the idea that
though the kingdom has fallen and Camelot’s time has passed, the wisdom of Arthur and the
lessons learned in the poem by the other characters will carry forward, beyond death, and
lead the next generation toward new life, as Tennyson illustrates by situating Arthur’s birth
on the eve of his father’s passing.

Whereas Arthur's maturation process spans the entirety of his life and of *Idylls of the
King*, the maturation of Sir Gareth extends only from the beginning to the end of one idyll,
the idyll devoted to him: "Gareth and Lynette." The first line of this idyll introduces young
Gareth and identifies him as the youngest of his family: "The last tall son of Lot and Bellicent, /And tallest, Gareth" (ll. 1-2). Though he is no longer technically a child, his mother refers to him as one and wishes him to be like one, but he insists on being at least an adolescent, fighting fallen trees or imaginary knights in an attempt to prove his developing prowess; Gareth resists his mother is continually treating him as a child:

And I that know,

Have strength and wit, in my good mother's hall
Linger with vacillating obedience,
Prisoned, and kept and coaxed and whistled to--
Since the good mother holds me still a child! ("Gareth and Lynette" ll. 10-15)

Garth's mother calls him a "child" no fewer than nine times in his idyll's first one hundred lines. In this idyll, Tennyson further emphasizes Gareth's youthfulness and childlike existence through his description of old King Lot, once a notable warrior, now past his prime:

His age hath slowly droopt, and now lies there
A yet-warm corpse, and yet unburiable
No more; nor sees nor hears, nor speaks, nor knows. (ll. 78-80)

After Gareth convinces his mother to allow him to leave their home, Tennyson begins referring to him as a youth. Throughout most of the tale Arthur, the court's knights, and Lynette call him "young Gareth."

Until Gareth proves himself an honorable warrior and knight then he is a youth. Throughout *Idylls*, Tennyson commonly associates the word "youth" with either unbridled lust for life and action or with inexperience. The king calls him "A goodly youth and worth a
goodlier boon!" (l. 440). Only after the king assigns him the duty of defending Lynette against the knights Day, Morning-Star, Noon-Sun, and Evening-Star Gareth is referred to as “Sir,” not young or youthful Gareth. In this moment, Gareth matures from adolescence to adulthood; his elevation shows his growing not only in age but in status and maturity as well.

At the completion of the idyll, a mature and grown Gareth calls Death, whom he has conquered, "fair child" (l. 1380). Gareth moves through an entire maturation cycle; the idyll portrays him moving from childhood through adolescence and into manhood, the status he holds throughout the poem until his implied death in “The Last Tournament.”

Unlike Arthur, Tennyson's knights mature completely over the course of the poem. Gawain, Lancelot, Pelleas, Balin and Balan, and Tristam remain in one state or only move between two. Tennyson introduces most of the characters in the *Idylls*, such as Launcelot, as men or knights, untouched by the aging process. Though Tennyson does not illustrate Lancelot's maturation, Arthur does elevate him in status when he leaves him in charge of the tournament of Dead Innocence as he leads the younger soldiers into battle with the Red Knight, but Launcelot’s iniquities in past idylls keep him from moving physically, mentally, and spiritually beyond “The Last Tournament.” Tennyson rarely if ever refers to him as young or old but treats him as being as if he is in a perpetual state of manhood. Similarly, Tennyson describes Balin as being in a perpetual state of childhood, at least mentally, in "Balin and Balan," in “Pelleas and Ettarre” and “The Last Tournament” Pelleas remains in a state of stunted youthful adolescence, his actions marked by rashness and haste. The men in the poem who are unable to grow either mentally, spiritually or both, cease to move forward in the narration and, ultimately, cease to exist.
One of the most interesting maturational cycles is that of “Elaine the fair, Elaine the loveable.” Tennyson introduces Elaine as a young woman, and instead of locking her into this position, he ages her physically, mentally, and spiritually. Elaine is one of Tennyson’s “true” women; she is faithful, loyal, selfless, and good natured. Despite the sin she reads on Launcelot’s face, Elaine sees the good in him, as she sees the good in all: “Marr’d as he was, he seem’d the goodliest man / . . . she lifted up her eyes / and loved him, with that love which was her doom” (“Launcelot and Elaine” ll. 254, 258-59). Fully aware that “the shackles of an old love straiten’d him” (l. 870), she nurses him back to health when he is ill. Just before dying of love-sickness, the Lily Maid is described as having a face “bright as for sin forgiven” (ll. 1095) as her body weakens physically with anguish. After reading the goodbye letter she wrote, Launcelot grieves her death: “Fair she was, My King, / Pure, as you ever wish your knights to be” (1363-64). It is the sin of others that kills Elaine. She does not die because she is flawed but because she is too pure to remain in the sinful world in which she lives.

None of Arthur's knights of the Round Table appears to have lived through the last tournament; though not all of the names of the dead are reported, since no living knights are named at the end of the poem, save Arthur's loyal companion Bedivere, and the kingdom lies waste, one assumes that all others have died. It seems that no one remains at the end of Arthur's reign to begin a new society within the new era to which Tennyson alludes at the closing of the poem: "And slowly answer'd Arthur from the barge: / "The old order changeth, yielding place to new" ("The Passing of Arthur" ll. 407-8). None of Arthur's knights live through the tournament to usher in the new era. Arthur, with his elevated ideals
and acts, and Bedivere, the man who remains as a bardic figure to tell the story, are the only characters Tennyson moves out of this work and, potentially, into the next.

Tennyson does not leave any of his knights alive to welcome in the new era; he does not permit any of the knights of the Round Table to live, because their time has passed. Tennyson's two eternal characters, Arthur and Merlin, who is timeless and ageless in Tennyson's work and nearly all works, remain in spirit, as Bedivere does in body. Though all three characters seemingly leave the poem, Tennyson hints at the promise of their return. Merlin, ageless and eternal, and Arthur, healing his wounds, sleep. Only when needed will they again return—much like the Arthurian myth itself. In the essay "Tennyson's Narrative on Narration," John Reed notes, "Finally, with Arthur lost to his world, we are left only with an old man, assisted by no material evidence, who has become little more than a voice to retell the story for the benefit of later times" (205). When an old era ends and the only proof of that cycle resides in a voice, which may or may not turn into narration—perhaps in the form of Arthurian myth—a cycle is complete and a new cycle may begin through theology, history, or poetry (Reed 205).

Temporal Cycles Moving Together as One

Tennyson's cycles frequently overlap, with one or more of the temporal cycles commonly blending or moving into and/or out of others. A situation in which this pattern is most evident—a situation that no scholars have adequately addressed—is Gareth's encounter with the brotherhood of Day and Night in the idyll "Gareth and Lynette." In Gareth's interactions with the knights, Tennyson carefully constructs four scenes within which he incorporates all three of his temporal cycles, seasonal, diurnal, and maturational.
When viewed together, Tennyson's revolutions construct a regenerative rather than terminal image.

In an attempt to prove himself to King Arthur's court, Gareth challenges the Day and Night Knights: Morning-Star, Noon-Sun, Evening-Star, and Death. Each of these knights represents a particular seasonal, diurnal, and maturational cycle. The Morning-Star knight represents spring, morning, and youth. Tennyson paints Morning-Star's pavilion in shades associated with dawn and with spring; it is "gay with gold / In streaks and rays, and all Lent-lily hue," and its dome is purple and crimson ("Gareth and Lynette" ll. 888-90). He describes the Morning-Star knight as youthful; he leaps and is lively and, like a young man, is rash and inexperienced. He childishly taunts Gareth about being a kitchen-knave instead of a knight, brags of his own prowess, and claims that he can slay Gareth without the aid of armor. The knight dresses in blue arms with a shield of blue with a morning star upon it. The men fight during the morning hours of the day, when the dew is still upon the ground (ll. 905-915). When almost defeated by Gareth, the Morning-Star knight scowls and childishly retaliates with unbridled anger. When Gareth subdues him and unlaces the knight's helmet to kill him, the knight begs for mercy, and, being young and impressionable, Gareth frees him and sends him to Arthur's court, where he will learn to be an honorable knight.

The second knight Gareth challenges is Noon-Sun. Noon-Sun represents summer, mid-day, and adulthood. The knight rides a "huge red horse, and all in mail / Burnish'd to blinding . . . flash'd the fierce shield / All Sun" (ll.1000-5). The colors, light, and heat that Tennyson depicts in this scene are those he commonly associated with summer in his central idylls. The knight's strength is that of a trained knight in his prime; he fights with experience. Gareth questions whether or not he will be able to defeat the warrior. He only wins the
battle against the knight because Noon-Sun suffers an accident: "The hoof of his horse slipt in the stream, the stream / Descended, and the Sun was wash'd away" (ll. 1020-21).

The third knight Gareth fights is the Evening-Star. The Star of Evening represents autumn, evening, and old age. The knight enters "all in a rose red from the west / and all naked as it seem'd . . . / Not naked, only wrapt in harden'd skins / That fit him like his own" (ll. 1061-63, 1067-8). Just as Noonday Sun refers to his previously defeated brother, Morning-Star, as being his younger brother, Star of Evening tells Gareth that he is older than his previously defeated brothers. Star of Evening represents old age. His tough, wrinkled skin testifies to his advanced age; he is weathered like autumnal lands. When the damsel asks Sir Star, "Art thou not old?" Star answers, "Old, damsel, old and hard, / Old, with the might and breath of twenty boys." Gareth then quips, "Old, and over-bold in brag" (ll. 1077-80). Sir Evening Star is described as "old storm-beaten" and "russet," and he is dressed in "half-tarnish'd" and "half-bright" armor. Star of Evening fights with the determination of a knight who knows his time has passed, determined to use his last bit of strength before being defeated. Just before Gareth subdues the old knight, the Southwesterns—late summer or autumnal winds—roll over the ridge (ll. 1100-1120).

The last knight Gareth encounters is Death. Through pitch black, Death appears "High on a nightblack horse, in nightblack arms, /With white breast-bone, and barren ribs of Death" (ll. 1345-46). Death seems to be representing night and winter. Though death, night, and winter are commonly associated with an end, Tennyson describes Death's arrival in a manner that does not allude to an end but a potential beginning. Though it is dark, the knight "In the half-light—tho' the dim dawn—advanced" (l. 1349). It is not night but morning, and death does not recede but advances into the new day. Furthermore, when
Gareth casts Death to the ground and strikes him, splitting his skull, through the cracked helm emerges a young boy: "and out from this / Issued the bright face of a blooming boy / Fresh as a flower new-born" (ll. 1372-74). The young child begs for his life, and Gareth decides not to kill the boy; he instead sends him to Arthur's court to be educated in the ways of the court.

Gareth does not actually kill any of the knights. The youngest of the Day and Night knights are sent to Camelot to be redeemed, whereas the older knights fade away, washed away by moving waters. The older brothers literally pass away, while the younger ones begin anew, within a new order. All three of the cycles working together construct a vision of continuation. At first, it seems as though Tennyson might simply have Gareth defeat Spring/Youth/Morning, Summer/Maturity/Noon, Autumn/Old Age/Evening, and Winter/Death/Night, which in its own right promotes continuation. But by having Spring/Youth/Morning emerge from Death/Winter /Night, Tennyson shows that these cycles he threads throughout his work are not just unifying images but illustrate that when an era moves through a full rotation from beginning to end, at every end there is a new beginning.

A cycle has no permanent end or beginning, a point Tennyson attempted to convey through his use of the temporal cycle throughout his poem. By incorporating all three cycles in this section, Tennyson insists upon this idea. Reed claims that most of Tennyson's "repeated lines, images, and phrases create a sense of continuity and stasis" (194). The elements Reed refers to do provide continuity, but not stasis. The cycles, as they appear throughout the poem in their varying forms, are continual reminders of time's continual
motion. Even within a given point in time, the cycles within that time provide a sense of endless movement.

There Are No True Endings

In the “Holy Grail,” Percivale enters a monastery, quitting his earthly life in favor of an ethereal one. Upon entering the monastery, Ambrosius asks Percivale what drove him from the Round Table and inquires as to whether or not earthly passion was to blame. In response Percivale refers to the spiritual nature of Arthur’s kingdom:

Nay, for no such passion mine.

But the sweet vision of the Holy Grail

Drove me from all vainglories, rivalries,

And earthly heats that spring and sparkle out

Among us in the jousts, while women watch

Who wins, who fails; and waste the spiritual strength

Within us, better offer’d up to Heaven. (ll. 30-35)

Instead of battling evil and protecting spiritual honor and righteousness, the initial goal of the Knights of the Round Table, they battle one another for personal fame and earthly ambition.

Ambrosius, the name by which the first authors of Arthurian works give Arthur, takes Percivale in to his monastery. Ambrosius teaches him earthly and heavenly love and the highest ideals, acting as a earthly leader and spiritual guide for the young knight, much as the historical Arthur did in for his followers in the original Arthurian tales: “Ambrosius loved him much beyond the rest, / And honour’d him, and wrought into his heart / Always by love that waken’d love within” (ll. 9-11)
Percivale tells the monk of his time as a knight of the Round Table in Camelot and of the great hall Merlin built for Arthur long ago on the sacred mount of Camelot, which contained “four great zones of sculpture” (l. 231). He then describes the four zones of sculptures to Ambrosius:

And in the lowest beast are slaying men,
And in the second men are slaying beasts,
And on the third are warriors, perfect men,
And on the fourth are men with growing wings. (ll. 234-39)

These represent the stages of evolution of the human soul. The hall that contained these sculptures and a memorial to Arthur’s twelve great battles burns after Galahad sits in the “the Siege perilous.” At this point in Tennyson’s *Idylls*, though Arthur’s court is ravaged by with sin, he and his knights seek the Grail, seek a higher good to clean the kingdom of its spiritual evils.

By having Percivale reiterate this story to Ambrosius, or the first Arthur, Tennyson brings the evolution of humanity back to its beginning, when humankind was at his lowest and waiting to be saved by Ambrosius Aurelianus, as Britain was after the invasion of the Saxons. In the first lines of “The Coming of Arthur,” Tennyson refers to Aurelius, who reigned at a time when humankind was in its lowest state of civilization: “Where in the beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less, till Arthur came. For first Aurelius lived and fought and died” (ll. 11-12). Ambrosius is a reminder that humankind is ever evolving in the larger scheme, but suffers minor setbacks; despite this fact, it is ultimately

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6 Tennyson was clearly well acquainted with the first “Arthurs” and the works of Gildas, because in “The Coming of Arthur” he also cites the line, “Groan’d for the Roman legions here again” from Gildas’s *Groans of the Britons*, and provides the note for this borrowed line.
ever moving forward. Arthur’s court has moved through these stages over the course of the work, but in the end, it falls back toward a state most near bestial existence. Tennyson believed that “though the high soul of man is surrounded and saddened and outwardly defeated by these adverse and impure influences, yet in the end shall it triumph, and pass into glory” (H. Tennyson, Memoir I 107). Tennyson interweaves the cyclical nature of the Arthurian myth and the cyclical nature of human life and the human soul in a manner that more fully emphasizes the cyclical nature of each.

Tennyson hoped that by documenting change as it occurred, he might be able save his time from prematurely reaching the end of its cycle. Hallam Tennyson, in Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son, claims that at the end of his father's life, he felt his poem was a failure; when Tennyson died, he foresaw an end for Victorian England much like the one he had created for his Camelot. In his final days, Tennyson quoted Bacon’s “Opportuni magnis conatibus rerum transitus to express the full extent of this belief:

All ages are ages of transition, but this is an awful moment of transition. It seems to me as if there were much less of the old reverence and chivalrous feeling in the world than there used to be. I am old and maybe wrong, for this generation has assuredly some spirit of chivalry. We see it in acts of heroism by land and sea, in fights against the slave trade, in our Arctic voyages, in philanthropy, etc. The truth is that the wave advances and recedes. I tried in my "Idylls" to teach these things, and the need of the Ideal. But I feel sometimes as if my life had been a very useless life. (H. Tennyson, Memoir II 337)
The English people, like the knights of his Round Table, were quickly succumbing to the same vices—despair, and lust, pride, anger, and anarchy—as did his characters in *Idylls*.

F. B. Pinion notes that “The Coming of Arthur” and “The Passing of Arthur” are more the conclusion of a regime: “They indicate the cyclical significance of the *Idylls* as a whole, and provide the keys to its symbolism” (183); the antithesis between “man and beast” in these two idylls exemplifies the evolution and the reverse of evolution that takes place over the course of the Arthur’s reign and Tennyson’s *Idylls*. In the first idyll, Arthur enters into the world “Wherein the beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less” (*The Coming of Arthur* ll. 11-12). Over the course of his reign in Tennyson’s work, and in a number of traditional Arthurian tales, Arthur’s primary goal was to make “men from beasts” (*The Last Tournament*” l. 385), but in the final idyll of his poem, just before dying, he realizes that the realm “Reels back into the beast” (“The Passing of Arthur” 26). These lines remind readers of the cycles Tennyson included throughout his poem, which continually remind the reader of the evolution and devolution of men and of societies. But as is the case in Darwin’s theory of evolution, as one generation of men dies out, another is not merely born but is born stronger. For Tennyson’s generation, their failure was but one in a cycle of deaths and rebirths, but as one sees throughout the history of the Arthurian myth, with the fall on one generation of humanity is the rebirth of another, and ultimately the continuation of humanity; as Gordon reminds readers in his study of Tennyson’s *Idylls*, every fall by humanity and by societies is a fall forward.

**TENNYSON’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ARTHURIAN MYTH**

No author before Tennyson had paid such close attention to the role cycles play within the historical and narrative structure of the Arthurian myth, nor had any other author
incorporated these cycles with such purpose into his or her work as Tennyson did in his poem *Idylls of the King*. Several stories grew directly out of the *Idylls*, such as Lyman Koopman’s 1888 “The Death of Guinevere,” which begins where Tennyson’s idyll regarding Guinevere leaves off and creates a death scene for the queen, and “My Galahad,” which begins with lines borrowed from “The Holy Grail” and continues the story about the chaste knight (Taylor 168). However, more notable are the authors who, familiar with Tennyson’s work, borrowed several of the techniques he uses regarding cycles and the cyclical nature of the myth in their retellings of the Arthurian legend. The most popular works in which the borrowings appear are T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, and T. H. White’s *Once and Future King*.

**Twain: Recycling and Reversing Cycles**

It is a commonly known fact that Mark Twain had little respect for Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, and like Coleridge, dismissed the Arthurian myth as archaic; he believed the myth was an empty vessel in all of its forms. For Twain, a new Arthurian tale achieved little more than its own retelling. Ironically, it was Twain’s disdain for the Arthurian myth and most of the tales within it that led him to write his own. The Arthurian work that troubled Twain the most was Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, probably because it was the most current and because in it Tennyson gave new significance to a mythology Twain considered empty. Not only did Tennyson’s *Idylls* give the poem relevance, but in his work, he continually insisted upon the importance of the myth and the power of every generation to reinvent it in an applicable way. Twain’s opinion of the myth was in every way seemingly opposed to Tennyson’s. In his early notes for the book, Twain sketched out a comical competition between bards reciting lines from Tennyson’s “Break, Break, Break,” “The Fair Maid of Astolat,” and Lancelot and
Elaine” which Twain found ridiculous or problematic (Taylor 171). In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Twain satirized both the medieval world and contemporary authors’ treatments of it in literature.

Twain critiqued the uselessness of the Arthurian legends more broadly by criticizing their authors’ dependency on repetition, redundant telling and retelling of tales, and use antiquated language. He did so pointedly in two instances in the novel: in his depiction of Merlin’s reiterating the tale of the Lady of the Lake and through Hank’s reaction to Sir Dinadan the Humorist’s repetition of a “worm-eaten gag.”

When Merlin approaches the court to tell the story of Arthur’s meeting the Lady of the Lake, Clearance sighs and says “Marry we shall have it again, that same old weary tale that he hath told a thousand times in the same words, and that he will tell until he dieth” (Twain 24-25). The only thing Merlin successfully achieves by telling his tale is to bore his audience to sleep. Furthermore, it is the Arthurian joke that Sir Dinaden tells to Hank that eventually pushes Hank to hang himself. Upon first hearing the joke, Hank says, “I was one which I had heard attributed to every humorous person who had ever stood on American soil” and “never saw the day that it was worth the telling; and yet I had sat under the telling of it hundreds and thousands, and millions and billions of times, and cried and cursed all the way through” (73-74). Lee Clark Mitchell claims that despite Hank’s disdain for the anecdote’s repetition, he is complicit in its propagation by his own retelling of it later in the novel. Humorously, Twain must have realized when writing *A Connecticut Yankee* that he was doing precisely what he was writing against, the retelling of the Arthurian legend in a new way to a new audience with an original and contemporary purpose.
The recurrences that Tennyson admiringly illustrated structurally and narratively in his Arthurian work are the repetitions Twain disparages in his. For Twain, as Mitchell notes in “Lines, Circles, Time Loops and Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court,” the myth is so circular and recyclable that it had long lost any usefulness it might once have had: “So while the Arthurians demand recurrence as a narrative guarantee, the novel implies even more strongly that Camelot itself is a setting imbued with repetition, seeming to circle either outward or back in upon itself” (237). While Tennyson’s cycles promoted the eternity of the Arthurian myth and its motion toward evolution and continuation, Twain used these same cycles and loops to emphasize the intrinsic stagnation of the Arthurian legends, tales which when retold incite sleep or provoke suicide attempts.

In his Arthurian satire, Connecticut Yankee, Twain borrowed most of his plot, character, and thematic material from Malory (Taylor 170), but the narrative structure within which he encapsulated all of these elements is unquestionably Tennysonian. Twain borrowed the cycles and loops Tennyson uses throughout his poem with the intention of purposely reversing them.

Throughout the book there are both figurative and literal circles, loops, and cycles: there are a plethora of wheel, gyres, and discs within the tale; the story’s plot is circular; Hank travels back in time through a time-loop; and people speak using circular logic and using circular constructions (Mitchell 231). Whereas Tennyson instilled a sense of continual progression in his work and believed humanity was always moving forward toward good, if only by small strides, Twain’s main character, Hank, believes the only way to eradicate contemporary evils is by stopping the evil before it starts, evil he believes began in the
medieval era. For Hank, the greatest good is not achieved by progress and evolution or by striving for the highest ideals but by starting anew.

Tennyson used cycles intentionally to move his work narratively and structurally forward, while Twain used cycles deliberately to move his backward. In the *Idylls*, despite the fallbacks of humankind time moves forward and emphasizes the progress of humankind and the Arthurian myth, whereas in Twain the time moves backward and highlights the retreat of humanity and the Arthurian myth. In Tennyson, Arthur does not die but lives on elsewhere in another form, whereas in Twain, Hank dies and not only dies but commits suicide; he gives himself up.

Mitchell convincingly argues that Twain was bothered by literature’s attempt to redeem past, real-life situations by imbuing them with modern significances, an attempt he felt failed more often than it succeeded: “The larger point is that despite Hank’s vow ‘to disguise repetitiousness of fact under variety of form,’ his promised redemption of history through narrative describes little of this efforts in the novel” (238). For Twain, the narrative structures and functions of the Arthurian myth that Tennyson highlighted and praised in his work were aspects of the myth that troubled him most; his uneasiness with the Arthurian myth and what Tennyson illustrated about it in his *Idylls* was precisely what provoked Twain to write a book fronting the narrative tensions that existed within the whole of the Arthurian myth. Twain used Tennyson’s attention to the role cycles played in the Arthurian myth to explicitly note the narrative’s inability to “transfigure the past into desirable ends” (248). Yes, he seemed to believed that the Arthurian myth is cyclical and recyclable, but to what end and to what avail?
When Twain kills off Hank at the end of the book, he ends with the words “end” and “finish,” ultimately putting an end to his character (Mitchell 240), his book, and the reoccurrences and repetitions of the Arthurian myth—or at least in his retelling of the myth:

“The Boss had been getting along very well, and had amused himself with finishing up his record . . . to-morrow. It is here. And with it the end” (Twain 446-47). Twain, like Ruskin, felt that some social problems were best illustrated using those things “nearer and hearer” and that “true nobility is inherent and not inherited” among humankind (Taylor 171).

Eliot: Allusion and Borrowing

Few might associate Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” which was published in 1922, with Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, but Rajni Singh argues that a number of Eliot’s works were indebted to Tennyson. Though it is widely known that Eliot was highly critical of Victorian authors such as Ruskin, Carlyle, Thackeray, and George Eliot. Upon reading a review “Some Thoughts of a Reader of Tennyson,” Eliot once said he believed Tennyson to be a true professional: “He is the captain of our dreams. Others have lighted a candle in England, he lit the sun” (Tobin 101-03). Armstrong also notes that with how adamantly Eliot dismissed Tennyson, few noticed the strong Tennysonian echoes that reverberate through “The Waste Land” and “Four Quartets” (2). Singh in *Tennyson and T. S. Eliot: A Comparative Study* claims Eliot’s “Waste Land” seems to pass through “Tennyson’s Camelot.” She also comments on the ways in which each author used myth and legend to express their personal interests and needs and to comment on the temper of his age (Preface).

Eliot’s “The Waste Land” is a poem about a religious pilgrimage, which scholars consider a reinterpretation of Chaucer’s pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales*. Similarly, Tennyson’s *Idylls* is a reinterpretation and reworking of previous Arthurian legends. Both
authors reinterpret the Grail Quest and the search for spiritual renewal: as Taylor notes, “The central theme of man’s need for rebirth is one of timeless significance for which the symbolism of the Grail is an excellent vehicle . . . . Eliot could use allusions to the ancient myth to give expression to his personal distress and despondency through this myth while at the same time analyzing the sickness of his society” (237). Tennyson viewed Victorian society as Eliot did early-twentieth-century England, as a time of political and scientific advancement and spiritual decline.

Though the two writers use the Arthurian legends, particularly those concerning the Grail, to confront similar spiritual issues, each approached the stories allusively and used the Quest to suit his purposes and the lessons he wished to convey to his audience; each stitches together elements of the legend in a uniquely and individually meaningful way. The way in which Eliot sews together the biblical allusions in *The Burial of the Dead* is similar to the way in which Tennyson sews together biblical and Arthurian allusions in his “The Holy Grail” in *Idylls of the King*. Each author pulls accounts from well-known traditional or classic stories and works and constructs them in untraditional manners.


This, from the blessed land of Aromat--
Arimathaean Joseph, journeying brought
To Glastonbury, where the winter thorn
Blossoms at Christmas, mindful of our Lord.
And there awhile it bode; and if a man
Could touch and see it, he was at once healed
By faith, of all his ills. But then the times
Grew to such evil that the holy cup
Was caught away to Heaven, and disappeared. (ll. 48-58).

In the following passage Tennyson explains “the land of Aromat” to allude to Arimathea, home of Joseph, who received the Grail full of Christ’s blood. “After the day of darkness” alludes to the resurrection of the saints, and “Glastonbury” is the city in England that was believed to have grown from Joseph of Arimathaea’s staff. Tennyson ends this passage with a reference to the grail, the “holy cup / Was caught away to Heaven,” which is from Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*.7

Eliot pieces together, in mosaic form, Biblical phrases from Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, and Isaiah and ends with a quotation from the German *Tristan und Isolde*:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you

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7 Tennyson explicitly explains these allusions in the notes he provided for his *Idylls*. 
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;

I will show you fear in a handful of dust

_Frisch weht der Wind_

_Der Heimat zu_

_Mein Irisch Kind_

_Wo weilest du? (ll. 19-34)_

Both men piece together the fragmented sections of seemingly outdated and insignificant tales, legends, or works in a way that is significant to their reading audiences, Tennyson for Victorian England and Eliot for Modern England. Singh writes,

Eliot’s poetry is more or less an assimilation of many dead poets. In his work, one can find words, lines, and even subjects borrowed from different literature. For example, ‘The Waste Land,’ is his most fragmentary piece, where the poet, by condensing the quotations, was able to convey his vision of a whole of society in disintegration. (184)

Tennyson and Eliot blended past with present by piecing together fragments of different works and authors to form a new, blended, more meaningful whole. This technique, which is considered by most as a Modernist invention, was a technique Tennyson experimented with in his _Idylls_ and a number of his contemporaries felt he had “reduced [the Arthurian tales] to a series of endnotes” in the poem (Gray 2). In her study of Eliot, Taylor notes that “in taking much of the legend as he needed and using it allusively, Eliot make it easier for later writers such as David Jones to use the Arthurian material and intertwine it with other classic material in a similarly free manner” (238). Arguably, what she credits Eliot for doing for others is precisely what Tennyson did first for Eliot in his telling of the Arthurian myth.
Walt Whitman, in his 1881 “Song of the Exposition,” wrote of Arthur and his court, “Arthur vanish’d with all his knights, Merlin and Lancelot and Galahad, all gone . . . dirged by Tennyson’s sweet sad rhyme”(ll. 45-50, 54). This view of the poem most closely represents what Twain wished Tennyson’s contribution to the Arthurian myth might have been. However, Taylor argues that the lesson Whitman truly wishes to convey in this poem is that the “lessons of our New World . . . not to create only, or found only, / but to bring perhaps from afar what is already founded, / To give it our own identity” (Whitman 7, 1-3 quoted by Taylor 168). It is this sentiment regarding Tennyson’s view and articulation of the Arthurian tales that carries through most potently in T. H. White’s reinterpretations of the legends.

Taylor claims that White’s *Once and Future King* was the last of the Victorian versions of the Arthurian legend, despite its date of publication, 1958. Like Malory and Tennyson, White composed a work within which he attempted to include bits and pieces from the whole of the Arthurian myth, but in ways that were significant to World War II England. Throughout the work, White frequently refers to Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* and discusses the pieces he would be including and excluding according to their relevance to the story his narrator wished to tell. In *The Book of Merlyn*, White gives an account of the earliest versions and authors of Arthurian works, from Nennius and Geoffrey of Monmouth to “poor old White,” the most recent author to retell the myth. White’s work ends with a meta-conversation regarding the Arthurian myth and his contribution to it. White’s treatment of
the myth has much in common with Tennyson’s; the ultimate goals of both were the betterment of their respective contemporary societies, which they believed they might convey most effectively through the articulation of essential truths.

Not only were White’s narrative goals for this Arthurian legend and his overall respect for it similar to those of Tennyson, but he implemented similar structural and symbolic images. One cyclical element that White incorporates into his narrative structure is the maturational cycle. In “Once and Future King: The Book that Grows Up,” Alan Lupack explores the ways in which the characters age and notes how White draws attention to aging and maturing: “Aging is at the center of White’s work . . . the story may have been given to White, but his peculiar emphasis on the fading of the dream and on the movement of time heightens the poignancy of the loss” (217).

In *The Sword in the Stone*, Arthur begins as a young boy under the tutelage of Merlyn. White carries this theme through the next book, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, as he details the childhood of Gawain and his brothers. All age over the course of the next two books, *The Ill-Made Knight* and *The Candle in the Wind*, but they do not just age; they also mature. White writes, “Now the maturest or the saddest phase had come, in which enthusiasm had been used up for good” (T. H. White 477), and, as Lupack explains, the characters are “world-wise” and “world-weary” (217). In *The Book of Merlyn*, all of the characters have aged significantly, and Arthur is commonly referred to as “old,” “the old man,” or “an old man.” Though Lancelot is “ageing gallantry” (White 132) and Guinevere clearly ages, it is Arthur whom White most frequently cites in terms of age.

In Tennyson’s *Idylls*, as in White, no character other than Arthur, reaches full maturation before death. Arthur is the only character in his poem to reach spiritual maturity.
and complete the aging and maturational cycle. The only life which Tennyson illustrated fully is Gareth’s. He details his growth from child into a man and eventually to knighthood; Gareth, again, only becomes a knight after experiencing the world and its peril; with experience comes age. None of Tennyson’s knights makes it past middle age; all die in the “The Last Tournament.” Like Tennyson, the only character whose age White continually reiterated throughout the text is Arthur. Lupack argues that it is because he is the only character to reflect on the experience as a whole and experience the final stages of growth, which can also be said of Tennyson’s Arthur. The level of maturation each author assigns to his characters is directly related to the growth these characters experience over the course of the work.

Though there are distinct differences between the ways in which Tennyson and White depict age and maturation in their works, and White more attentively and precisely developed and incorporated the maturational cycle into his texts than did Tennyson, the two men both use age and maturation to reflect the spiritual and mental health of the kingdom. Lupack notes, “What is remarkable is that White reflects this aging in the macro-structure of his book. In a rather brilliant structural experiment, at the same time that the characters age in the sequence, the book itself is growing up with them” (217).

Finally, White associates children, like Arthur, with animals or beasts, which he reintroduces at the end of his story; Lupack comments on the ingenuity of this circular pattern and the way in which it adds structural completion to the story (221). Tennyson’s beginning idyll, “The Coming of Arthur,” begins with animal imagery: “And so there grew great tracts of wilderness, / Wherein the beast was ever more and more / But man was less and less, till Arthur came” (l. 10-13). In the final idylls, with the Round Table falling,
Lancelot battles beasts on his Grail quest in “The Holy Grail.” In “The Last Tournament,” Guinevere’s churl returns to the castle maimed, and when she asks what “beast” did this to him, the answer is the Red Knight. In this same idyll, Tristram refers to humankind as “beasts” several times in his conversation with the queen; and in “Guinevere,” the narrator calls Mordred “a subtle beast” twice. Finally in “The Passing of Arthur,” Arthur comments on the state of his kingdom:

For I, being simple, thought to work His will,
And have but stricken with the sword in vain;
And all whereon I leaned in wife and friend
Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm
Reels back into the beast, and is no more. (ll. 22-26)

Tennyson begins his work and ends his work with humans as animals or beasts.

Though the way in which T. H White uses animal imagery is slightly different, his bestial pattern is reminiscent of Tennyson’s cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. Tennyson and White’s works begin with stories of birth and end with symbols of rebirth, a technique Lupack argues is a fitting end so that the cycle can begin again (222). Though Lupack never mentions Tennyson in his study of the maturation cycle in *The Once and Future King*, Tennyson’s use of age and maturational cycles must have been an inspiration for White’s work. The maturational process in both Arthurian creations closely follows and reflects the rise and fall of Arthur and his kingdom.

While a number of authors who wrote after Tennyson respected his Arthuri...
thematically, structurally, and narratively. Some, integrated elements of Tennyson’s works in their own way, others, like Eliot, changed them just slightly, while a few, like Twain, imitated elements of Tennyson’s work with the intention of rejecting or reversing what Tennyson revealed about the myth in his poem. The ways in which Tennyson incorporated cycles into his work to emphasize the overall structure and purpose of the Arthurian myth inspired later authors to address these aspects of the myth in their Arthurian works.

CONCLUSION

The Arthurian myth is a number of legends, of cycles, which move linearly through time, from the earliest recorded Arthurian tale, from Gildas's sixth-century *On the Downfall and Conquest of Britain* (past), into Tennyson's nineteenth-century *Idylls of the King* (present), and through later works, such as T. H. White's twentieth-century *Once and Future King* (future). Tennyson created a model in his poem through his use of linear time and temporal cycles that represents the motion and movement of past times, of his times, of times to come, and of the Arthurian myth as a whole. Furthermore, through his use of structural cycles, he illustrated the historical and narrative structure of the Arthurian myth as a whole and how it might be used to teach society through stories of past failure and success how to avoid earthly and spiritual pitfalls, while promoting the ideas of rebirth and hope despite the failures of single generations. Finally, what is most innovative about Tennyson’s poem is the way in which he published it; he published it cyclically or periodically so that society could learn from it as it was being written, as opposed to writing it retrospectively as former Arthurian writers had, thus reinforcing the constemporaneity of the Arthurian myth.
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