



SYMBOLISM AND MORAL THEMES IN THOMAS MALORY'S LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

Otamurodova Moxichexrabonu Otamurod qizi

*Research Scholar, 1st-year Master's Student Asia International University,
Bukhara, Uzbekistan*

Scientific advisor: Khamova Nargiza Khayrullojeva

ABSTRACT. *This article provides a comprehensive examination of symbolic elements in Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, a foundational text of medieval Arthurian literature. The study focuses on key symbols such as the Sword in the Stone, Excalibur, the Round Table, the Holy Grail, and the fall of Camelot. Through literary analysis, the paper argues that Malory uses symbolism to convey deeper themes of kingship, morality, spirituality, unity, and the fragility of human ideals. These symbols enrich the narrative, giving it philosophical and moral depth beyond its chivalric storyline.*

KEYWORDS: *Malory; Le Morte d'Arthur; symbolism; Arthurian literature; medieval narrative; Excalibur; Round Table; Holy Grail; kingship; chivalry*

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur is one of the most influential works in the Arthurian tradition, blending legend, history, and moral reflection. While the text is often celebrated for its heroic adventures and portrayal of medieval chivalry, it also demonstrates sophisticated use of symbolism. These symbolic elements allow Malory to communicate complex ideas about leadership, justice, spirituality, and human weakness. This article analyzes the most significant symbols in the narrative and explains how each contributes to the thematic development of the work.

The Sword in the Stone: Symbol of Legitimate Authority


The Sword in the Stone is among the most iconic symbols in Arthurian legend. In Le Morte d'Arthur, it represents divinely sanctioned kingship. Arthur's ability to draw the sword signifies that his rule is not determined by noble birth alone but by destiny and inner virtue. This symbol communicates three major ideas:

1. Divine legitimacy – Arthur is chosen by a higher power.
2. Moral worthiness – true leadership is linked to purity of character.
3. Transformation – Arthur's rise from obscurity symbolizes spiritual rebirth.

Thus, the Sword in the Stone establishes Arthur as the rightful king and sets the moral foundation for his reign.

The Round Table: Idealism, Unity, and Chivalric Brotherhood

The Round Table is a central symbol of Arthur's political and moral vision. Its circular form eliminates hierarchy, reinforcing the idea that all knights are equal in honor.



Symbolically, the Round Table stands for: Equality and justice, Collective duty, The pursuit of moral and social harmony. However, the eventual collapse of the Round Table order highlights the fragility of idealistic systems when challenged by human jealousy, betrayal, and personal desire. Thus, the Round Table symbolizes both the height of Arthurian utopia and the tragedy of its failure.

Camelot: The Ideal Kingdom and Its Fragility

Camelot stands as the symbolic heart of Arthur's vision—a realm built on justice, unity, and noble purpose. It represents the peak of human civilization, a model of moral order. Yet its downfall reveals essential themes:

Human imperfection

The destructiveness of betrayal and ambition

The vulnerability of noble ideals. Camelot's collapse is not merely a physical destruction but a symbolic reminder that even the most perfect societies can fall when moral values weaken.

The Tragic Fall of Arthur: Symbol of Lost Ideals

Arthur's death symbolizes the end of an age of heroism and the collapse of collective moral aspiration. His downfall conveys several thematic messages:

-No leader, however virtuous, can escape the consequences of human flaws in others.

-Destiny plays a powerful role in medieval literature.

-Ideals, though fragile, continue to inspire future generations.

Arthur becomes a mythic figure whose death marks both an ending and a promise that noble ideals endure in human memory.

CONCLUSION

Symbolism in Le Morte d'Arthur deepens the narrative and elevates it from a simple chivalric romance to a philosophical reflection on kingship, morality, and human nature. Each symbolic element—the Sword in the Stone, Excalibur, the Round Table, the Holy Grail, and Camelot—embodies a distinct dimension of Malory's vision. They collectively illustrate the challenges of upholding virtue in a flawed world and the tragic consequences of moral failure. Through these symbols, Malory presents a timeless exploration of the balance between idealism and human imperfection.

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