Filling in the Template:
King Arthur as an Exercise in Answering a Generation's Questions

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Why is it that an obscure medieval king, who very possibly might never have existed, has, over the centuries and in various countries, inspired works as diverse as Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Wagner's *Parsifal,* Tennyson's *Idylls of the King,* Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon,* the movie, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and the graphic novel, *Camelot 3000*? That question about King Arthur has intrigued me for years. In spring of 2011, I taught an undergraduate class centered on that question – and a possible answer.

The answer I offered to the students is as follows: the legend of Arthur acts as a template into which different generations can insert questions about their own time and society, using Arthur and his cohort to provide answers. Other older literary texts are unable to do that because they are too historically specific. For example, take the medieval French *Song of Roland*. Roland and the remaining characters are tied so explicitly to the events of Charlemagne's failed conquest of Spain in 778, specifically the massacre of the rear guard of Charlemagne's army on August 15, 778, that it is difficult to free Roland from the event. Arthur, on the other hand, has mysterious origins. We know next to nothing about him. He, perhaps, led the defense of Britain against the Saxons in the early sixth century. The lack of historical specificity leaves Arthur rather "empty". In Arthur we have an outline with little detail, i.e. a handy template for each generation to use.

Throughout the semester the class applied the "template theory" to the various texts we read such as the medieval *Arthurian Romances* by de Troyes, the Victorian *Idylls of the King*, and twentieth-century short stories such as Shoaf's "The Romance of Arthur, Vortigern's Daughter" and Zelasny's "Last Defender of Camelot." By the latter part of the semester, with various texts under their belt, students could appreciate how over centuries the character of Arthur had evolved and was employed by de Troyes, Malory, and Tennyson to address cultural and social issues in twelfth-century France, and fifteenth- and nineteenth-century England. That was great! But what I wanted to do was test and assess how well the template theory worked. A standard end-of-semester paper was an option. A more intriguing option was for students to perform the task of working with the Arthurian template and then reflect on that exercise.

What follows in the remainder of this article is the overall description of the high-stakes assignment, a description of the supporting exercises and conclusions about the assignment: "Filling in the Arthurian Template."

Filling in the Arthurian Template:
the Art and Craft of Character

Example has more followers than reason. We unconsciously imitate what pleases us, and approximate to the characters we most admire.
--Christian Nevell Bovee

Overall Goal: This assignment is intended to have you consider the concept of character and how character reflects the author's/audience's evolving worldview.

Context for the assignment: When creating a character, how in-depth do you delve into their motives for doing what they do? How far should you? What is the author trying to achieve in having the character do what he does and say what she says? How does a character express the worldview of the time? In our class on Arthurian literature, we are looking at how the character/trope/motif/purpose of Arthur or Lancelot, etc. has been developed, interpreted, reinterpreted, and used over the centuries. The Arthur/Lancelot/Guinevere/ Mordred of the graphic novel, *Camelot 3000*, is very different from that of Tennyson's work or that of de Troyes. The Mordred of Stewart's *Wicked Day* is more "sympathetic" than that of Malory. Each era develops the Arthurian material to suit its own purposes, teaching the lessons the era deems appropriate. In this assignment, you will take one of the characters of the Arthurian corpus and develop the character to express what the character means to you in 2011.

End Product: In this assignment, you will practice evolving a character from the Arthurian corpus. The character will be placed in an episode of your own creation in which you make the Arthurian corpus relevant to our time.

How will you do this? See the process below.

Process for the assignment:
1. In a supporting exercise, you will practice how writers bring their own degree of understanding of the human psyche to their characters.
2. In a second supporting exercise, "Developing Critical and Analytical Thinking about Literary Characters," you will explore how an Arthurian character has evolved through various iterations.
3. Create the episode in which you will offer a new iteration of an Arthurian character as a way of making the Arthurian material relevant to today.
4. Write the accompanying and important cover letter in which you reflect on the whole exercise.

You should hand in a product that includes:
1. **Cover Page with:**
    *   A title for your project
    *   Your name
2. **Cover Letter:** Write a cover letter that addresses the following questions:
    *   Why did you select the character that you did for this project?
    *   What particular issue (philosophical, spiritual, cultural, or political) did you want to explore through the Arthurian character you have taken and adapted and evolved?
    *   How did your prevailing worldview influence your approach to the topic?
    *   How does the episode you created make the Arthurian corpus relevant to our time?
    *   What seemed particularly difficult or interesting from this assignment?
3. **The episode you have created**.

How will we get to this final product? We will use "supporting" exercises upon which we will build our knowledge base for the assignment. (See above.) These exercises will take place in class. **See the Supporting Exercises document.**

Grading Rubric: See separate document.

Beyond the fact that the students had to create an episode in which they offered a new iteration of an Arthurian character as a way of making the Arthurian material relevant to today, what was equally important was the cover letter (see details above) in which students had to answer such questions as: "What particular issue (philosophical, spiritual, cultural, or political) did you want to explore through the Arthurian character you have taken, adapted and evolved? How did your prevailing

worldview influence your approach to the topic?" Here is where I discovered what students had learned about the significance of the Arthurian material and the dynamic at the heart of how distinct generations had drawn on the Arthurian material to explore their own political, religious and social questions. To get to the major assignment, the class participated in two supporting exercises.

The first supporting exercise was a simple "game" in which students practiced "seeing" characters. As the lesson plan below makes explicit, working in groups students had to study an assigned photo from which they had to create a character. Since two groups worked with the same photo it became very interesting when each group shared its creation. Very different characters were created from the same image. The two photos used in class appear at the end of the lesson outline. The photos are from Google Images.

Filling in the Arthurian Template
Supporting Exercise 1: Seeing Characters

In this supporting exercise to the final assignment, you will practice how writers bring their own degree of understanding of the human psyche to their characters. How will you do this? See below.

1. Open the Groups Folder to discover which group you will be working with.

2. Gather together as a group and examine the photo you have been assigned. The photos are found in the Supporting Exercise 1 folder. Two groups will work with the 1930s photo, and two groups with the photo from the 1940s. If you have the "1930s Family" photo, work specifically with the boy.

3. Writers give their characters a personality, or ideas, corresponding to the requirements of the plot. Also, writers endow their characters with different functions in a work. Apart from possessing a psychological dimension, characters may represent a certain social type, or they may fulfill a philosophical function by defending or attacking ideas that the writer has set out elsewhere in the work. Sometimes the reader is inclined to judge characters critically, sometimes to identify with them. The author can attempt to control our reactions by the way the author presents the characters – introducing positive or negative comments from a narrator or other characters, or by involving them in certain kinds of action, revealing their inner thoughts and so on.

4. Look at your assigned photo. Keep in mind what's written in the previous paragraph. Create a character from the image in the photo. We will compare creations from each group to see how we are able to create very different characters from the same image. This should help you consider what you need to do for the final assignment.

1930s family (www.infomercantile.com)

Woman Aircraft Worker
http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/2179930812

At the end of the first supporting exercise, the students expressed their surprise at how their readings of characters from the photos were poles apart. The photos acted effectively as templates through/in/from which the students created fascinating stories. As discussion of the distinctive interpretations continued, class members gradually understood how their character creations and readings of the photos reflected their own worldview just as Tennyson's use of the Arthurian template, for example, reflected his concerns about nineteenth-century Britain.

Having succeeded in provoking students to grapple with how characters reflect the worldview of the author, it was time to move to the next supporting exercise for the final assignment. The purpose of the exercise was to help students map qualities and traits of their chosen Arthurian character and uncover how they were causing the character to "evolve" from earlier iterations. See the outline below.

Supporting Exercise #2: Developing Critical and Analytical Thinking about Literary Characters

OVERVIEW
Word maps/concept maps can help us represent and analyze the various feelings, thoughts, and actions of a character in a story. In this class session, you are asked to take a character from an Arthurian text from class or from elsewhere. With the use of a word map, identify the character's qualities or traits based on her or his actions. Note the character's feelings and actions, reflecting upon these in the word/concept map. Use the map to uncover how the author has caused the character to "evolve" from earlier iterations in other texts.

STUDENT OBJECTIVES
Students will
✓ Use a word map as a strategy for better understanding the characters in a story
✓ Analyze the many aspects of a character's life, problems, situations, feelings, and actions
✓ Begin to plan your high stakes assignment, i.e. what episode will you create using your chosen Arthurian character.

DIRECTIONS
1. Choose the character you wish to examine.
2. Working from your reading of the text, note the character's feelings and actions.
3. What does the character's feelings and actions reveal in the context of the specific text you are working with? In other words, do they reveal an underlying agenda of the author? How would you characterize the agenda? Is a specific worldview or philosophical, spiritual, political viewpoint being proposed or brought to life through the character?
4. On your map, make note of what predictions you would make about the character?
5. **Keep this map**. Think about how you wish to re-imagine your chosen character. What message, worldview, or philosophical, spiritual, political viewpoint do you wish to convey

through your own creation of an episode involving your chosen Arthurian character? Answering this question becomes important, not only to the piece you will create, but in the letter which will accompany the creative element.

Working on the second supporting exercise in class was most helpful as it allowed me to listen to any concerns students had pertaining to (a) the Arthurian character the student was using, (b) which aspects of the character to develop, (c) how to read their iteration of their chosen Arthurian character in the light of de Troyes, Malory, and the other authors we had studied, and (d) whether their developing character really expressed the rhythms and concerns of 2011 American society. Most of the conversations at this point were about which genres to work in. Once this stage was completed, the class moved into the first part of the final assignment itself, i.e. creating their Arthurian episode.

While success varied in the actual episodes that students created, each student's cover letter demonstrated that they had come to a much deeper understanding of how the Arthurian template provided opportunities to explore contemporary issues. Here follow sample statements from students' cover letters in which they explain how the Arthurian template helped them explore contemporary issues important to them. The first student addressed the lack of religious tolerance in contemporary American society, particularly in reference to Westboro Baptist Church:

Using Galahad and Percival's religious affiliations, and the stories, settings, and history of Arthurian lore, I was able to address a current issue that is truly important to me. I was able to represent my dislike of religious schism and superiority, and my desire for peaceful resolution of these issues.

The second student used the Arthurian template to explore her belief that the mania people of 2011 have with documenting their lives via social media is ridiculous:

My intention was to exaggerate the comic faults of each character, specially Gawain, in order to drive home my point, which is that the people of 2011 are obsessed with documenting every facet of their lives and making it public. My goal was to place Gawain, and other Arthurian characters, in the prime example of modern stupidity by making them the stars of their own reality T.V. show: The Real Knights of Camelot Country!

While having the students create a new iteration of an Arthurian character was essential, I was not so much concerned as to whether a student succeeded in crafting a brilliant new piece of Arthurian fiction. What was paramount was the reflection students engaged in in the cover letters. There I could see how they had come to an understanding of the concept of the Arthurian template with which we had grappled throughout the semester. The students' reflections revealed their understanding of how the Arthurian template worked. Their newly created Arthurian episodes substantiated the validity of the Arthurian template concept.