

A blue-tinted photograph of a coastal landscape. In the center, a large, dark rock formation with several tall, thin trees on top stands in the water. To the left, a smaller, isolated rock formation is visible. The water in the foreground is calm, reflecting the rock formation and the sky. The sky is a uniform light blue, suggesting a misty or overcast day. The overall mood is serene and mysterious.

# Arthurian Legends

The Mists, the Magic and the Romance

# Unit Overview: Evolution of a Hero

- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Poet Unknown
- “The Death of Arthur”, an excerpt from Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*
- “The Lady of Shalott” an excerpt from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*.

## *Sir Gawain and the **Green Knight***

- Written somewhere between **1375-1400**
- Poet's exact identity unknown
  - is believed to have written 3-4 other works relating to religion and legend
  - is a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer
- Written in Middle English
- Considered the best of the Middle English romances
- The most “English” of Arthurian legends, because it features Sir Gawain instead of Sir Lancelot as the best of Arthur's knights

# “The Death of Arthur” by Sir Thomas Malory

- An Excerpt from *Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory
- Published in 1485
- Originally published in 21 volumes
- Written in Middle English
- Combines elements of French Romance with Celtic legends
- Is the basis of all Arthurian material in modern times

# “The Lady of Shalot” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

- Published in 1892.
- An excerpt from *Idylls of the King*, a group of poems by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, about King Arthur
- extremely influential poet, fascinated by Arthur
- Part of an artistic movement in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England that celebrated the ideals of chivalry, Camelot and King Arthur



# The Basic Story of Arthur

--Malory's version

# Arthur's Birth and Coming of Age

- Father: **King Uther Pendragon** of England. Mother: **Queen Igraine**, of Cornwall.
- Fostered with **Sir Ector**, by **Merlin's** arrangement, oblivious to the identity of his real parents.
- Claimed his birthright by pulling the enchanted **sword from the stone**.
- Was given the sword, **Excalibur**, by the **Lady of the Lake**.
- Unknowingly lay with his half-sister, **Margawse**, and beget **Mordred**, who would later come back to threaten Arthur's throne.

# The Coming of Camelot

- Arthur marries **Guenevere**, daughter of King Leodegrance, despite Merlin's warning
- Receives his father's **Round Table** from the King as part of her dowry, along with 100 knights
- The table seated 150, so Arthur began looking for more to fill the space. He only found 28.



# Well-known Knights of the Round Table

- Sir Gawain (or Gawaine)
- Sir Gaheris
- Sir Kay
- Sir Ector
- Sir Lancelot du Lac
- Sir Tristram
- Sir Gareth
- Sir Percivale
- Sir Galahad
- Sir Bedivere
- Sir Agravaine



# Merlin the Magician

- A mysterious figure in Arthurian legends with supernatural powers
- Helps King Uther in his quest for Igraine—assists in Arthur's conception
- Takes Arthur away from parents after his birth to live with Sir Ector during childhood
- Is instrumental in establishing Arthur's early kingship
- Eventually falls in love with Nimue, a maiden of the Lake (and therefore magical) who had been rescued by King Pellinore on a quest.
- Is imprisoned by Nimue under a rock, and never heard from again.

# Sir Lancelot du Lac

- The strongest and the bravest of all the knights
- Appears during one of Arthur's battles in France, becomes a knight of the Round Table.
- Is Arthur's most beloved knight
- Is famous for his heroic deeds, and his love affair with Queen Guenevere
- Is French in origin: a French Romantic element introduced in the legend by Sir Thomas Malory

# The Salad Days

- Over the passing years, Arthur and his knights have many battles, adventures and quests, rescuing fair maidens, killing evil knights and kings, and slaying magical beasts.
- There is peace and unity throughout Arthur's England

# Disenchantment

- Guenevere and Lancelot fall in love, cross the boundary between courtly and physical love and have an affair that lasts for more than 25 years.
- Guenevere is twice accused of treasonous adultery. Every time she is accused of treason, Lancelot wins by “trial of arms” and “proves” her innocence. But their affair becomes common knowledge to just about everyone...except Arthur himself.
- Sir Agravaine is convinced of their affair and vows to catch them.....

# Disillusionment

- Sir Agravaine is eventually successful, catching Guenevere and Lancelot together one night as the King is away hunting.
- He surprises Lancelot and Guenevere with a dozen knights
- After killing and maiming the knights, Lancelot steals away in armor he borrowed from a knight he'd just killed
- Arthur has no choice but to acknowledge the truth, and sentence his queen to death by burning at the stake for treason.

# Fallout

- Lancelot returns to rescue Guenevere from the stake (for the third time), this time taking her to his castle.
- Arthur pursues, lays siege to the castle with Sir Gawain and others.
- During the months' long siege, Arthur is eventually ordered by the Pope to take Guenevere back for the good of the country and let Lancelot go.
- Lancelot returns Guenevere to Arthur, leaves for France.

# The End of the Dream

- Arthur pursues Lancelot for revenge
- Sir Mordred, the result of Arthur's long-ago incestuous union with Margawse, seizes the throne of England while Arthur is away, and circulates the story that Arthur is dead.
- Arthur breaks off his pursuit of Lancelot to defend his throne from his son...

*To Be Continued...*



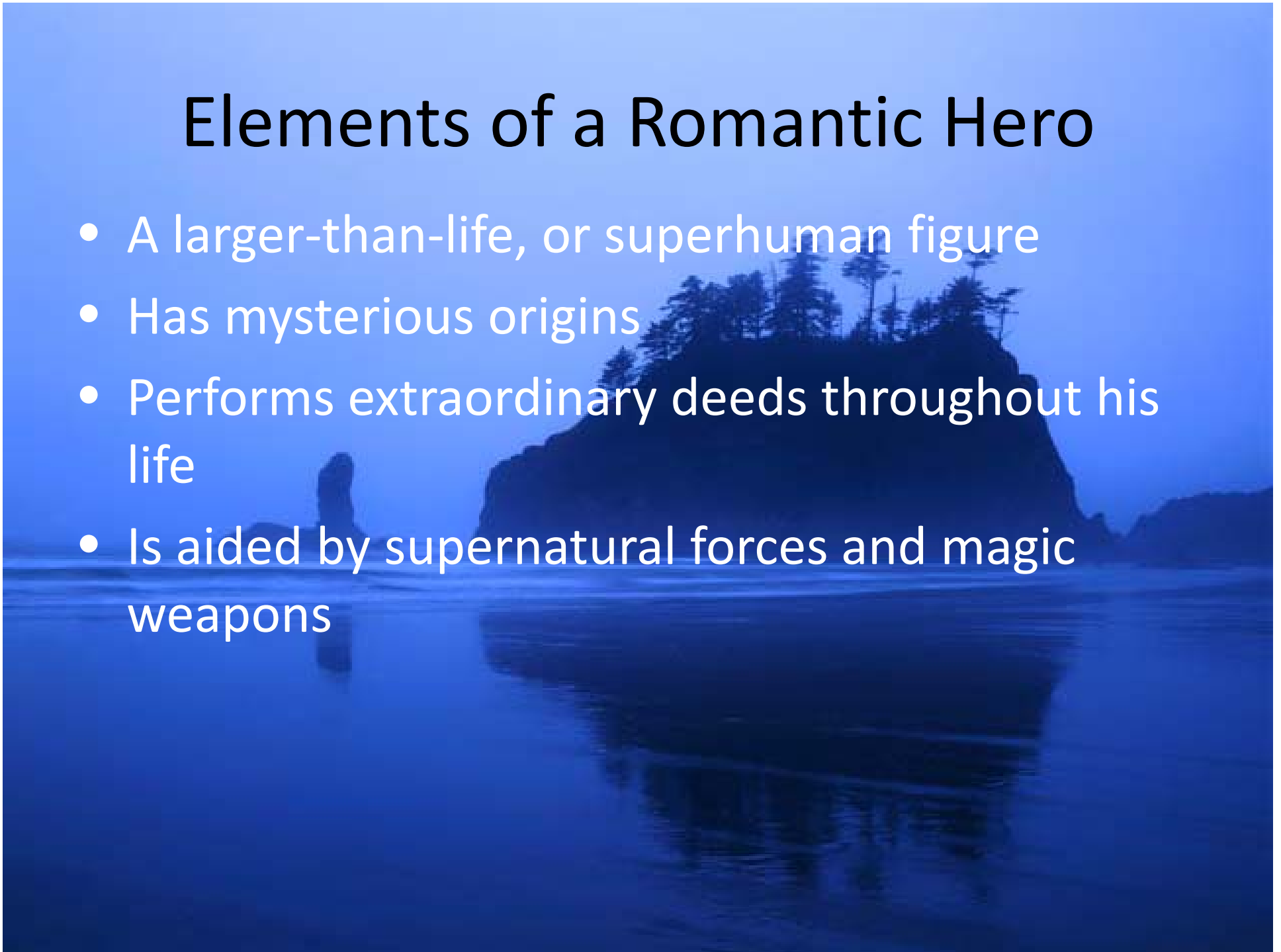
# Ideals of Camelot

- Code of Chivalry
- Courtly Love
- Order and formality of Feudalism
- Principles of Christianity (Catholicism)



# Elements of a Romantic Hero

- A larger-than-life, or superhuman figure
- Has mysterious origins
- Performs extraordinary deeds throughout his life
- Is aided by supernatural forces and magic weapons



## King Arthur: the Archetype of the Romantic Hero

- An archetype is an ideal example, or an original model after which other similar things are patterned.
- Arthur embodies all the characteristics of the ultimate romantic hero:
  - he is born under mysterious circumstances
  - grows up in obscurity
  - undergoes a childhood initiation involving a magic weapon
  - Fights to defeat evil and promote peace
  - Aided by magic weapons and wise mentors throughout his life
  - Mysterious departure from the world

# Arthur's Enduring Appeal

- The simplicity of feudal loyalties vs. the complexities of modern society
- The Chivalric Code of honor
- The magic atmosphere of Camelot
- The idea that “right” can prevail over “might”
- The prophecy of Arthur's eventual return

# Further Reading

- *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain, 1889.
- *The Once and Future King*, T.H. White, 1958.
- Mary Stewart's trilogy, *The Crystal Cave* (1970), *The Hollow Hills* (1973), and *The Last Enchantment* (1979), told from Merlin's point of view.
- *The Dark is Rising*--a highly acclaimed children's series by Susan Cooper: *Over Sea, Under Stone* (1965), *The Dark is Rising* (1973), *Greenwitch* (1974), *The Grey King* (1975), and *Silver on the Tree* (1977).

# Plays and Movies

- *Camelot*, 1967, 1982 (stage play and later movie based on T.H. White's novel)
- *The Sword in the Stone*, 1963 (Disney animated film based on *Morte D'Arthur*)
- *First Knight*, 1995
- *Excalibur*, 1999
- *The Mists of Avalon*, 2001

And of course...

- *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 1975 (and recently *Spamalot*, the play based on the movie).
- Many, many others!