

Arthur: High King of Britain

I can still see clear in my mind the wild forests of Wales and the wind-blasted mountains above them where I passed my early years. And they were carefree, those years, I had a mother for my best friend, and a father for my constant companion and teacher. He taught me how to hunt, to stalk silently, to kill cleanly. From him I learnt how to handle a hawk, to sweeten in a fox, to hold a bow without a tremble as I pulled it taut, and to use a sword and a spear as a knight should. But from my mother I learnt the great things. I learnt what is right, what is wrong, what should be and what should not be – lessons I am still learning even now, my friend. I never in my life have loved anyone more than my mother, and I think I never hated anyone more than my elder brother Kay.

Kay was six years older than I was and the bane of my young life. Time and again he would foist the blame for his own misdeeds on to my shoulders, for ever trying to turn Father against me – and in this he often succeeded. I would find myself banished to my room or whipped for something I had not done. I can see now the triumphant sneer in my brother's eyes. But with Mother he was never able to taint me. She would never hear a word against me, from Kay or from Father. She was my constant ally, my rock.

But she died. She died when I was just twelve years old. As she lay on her deathbed, her eyes open and unseeing, I reached out to touch her cheek for the last time. Kay grasped my arm and pulled me back.

'Don't you dare touch her,' he said, eyes blazing. 'She's my mother, not yours. You don't have a mother.' I appealed to Father and saw the flicker in his eye that told me that Kay was speaking the truth.

'Kay,' he said, shaking his head sadly. 'How can you say such a thing now, and with your mother lying still warm in death? What I told you, I told you in trust. How can you be so cruel? And you a son of mine.'

'And me?' I said. 'Am I not a son of yours too? Was she not my mother?'

'Neither,' said Father, and he looked away from me. 'I would have told you before, but could never bring myself to do it.'

'Then,' I cried, 'if I am not yours, and if I am not hers, whose am I? I can't be nobody's child.'

He took me by the shoulders. 'Dear boy,' he said, and he suddenly looked an old man, 'I cannot tell you who you are. All I know is that you were brought here as a newborn baby by Merlin. It was Merlin who made me promise to keep you, to protect you and to bring you up as I would my own son and this I have done to my very best. If there have been times when I was hard on you, then it was because I always had that promise to fulfil.'

'Merlin?' I asked. 'Who is this Merlin?'

Kay scoffed at that. 'Do you do nothing but dream? Everyone knows who Merlin is. He's the maker of the old druid magic, a weaver of spells, a soothsayer. He knows what will happen, long before it does happen. He knows everything that has been and everything that will be. Why he bothered with you I can't imagine.'

I turned to Father. 'Is this all true? I was brought here by this Merlin? My mother is not my mother? You are not my father?' He nodded and I could see the pain in his face reflecting my own. But Kay had to rub more salt in the wound.

'So you see,' he crowed. 'You are ... a foundling. You should be grateful we took you in.'

At that my blood was up. Small though I was, I felled him with one blow and I would have done him more damage had not Father pulled me off him.

'That is not the way I have taught you, Arthur,' he said, still holding me back. But I broke free of him and ran off into the forest. There I wandered for days and days like some wounded animal, maddened with pain.

Arthur: High King of Britain by Michael Morpurgo

Questions

- 1 Match each word to its definition and write them in your book. [1 mark]

foist	a contemptuous or mocking smile or remark
sneer	being sent away as punishment
triumphant	feeling or expression of having won
banished	to force or impose something upon a person

- 2 Find and copy the sentence that tells us Merlin was a sorcerer. [1 mark]

- 3 Decide whether each statement about the extract is true or false. [1 mark]

	True	False
Arthur's father taught him survival skills.		
Mother taught Arthur how to sew and cook.		
Arthur was unaware of Merlin the sorcerer.		

- 4 How old was Kay when Mother died? [1 mark]

- 5 *"Don't you dare touch her," he said, eyes blazing.* What does 'eyes blazing' suggest about how Kay is feeling? [1 mark]

- 6 How is the portrayal of Mother and Arthur's relationship enhanced through the use of the word 'ally'? [1 mark]

- 7 How do these phrases improve your understanding of Kay's feelings towards Arthur?
 • *'Don't you dare touch her ... She's my mother, not yours...'*
 • *'Do you do nothing but dream? Everyone knows who Merlin is...'*
 • *"So you see," he crowed. "You are a foundling..."* [1 mark]

- 8 What is the wound Arthur is speaking about when he says *'But Kay had to rub more salt in the wound.'*? [2 marks]

- 9 *"Neither," said Father, **and he looked away from me.** "I would have told you before, but could never bring myself to do it."*

What do you infer by Father looking away from Arthur at this point in the story? [3 marks]

- 10 How do you think Arthur's relationship with Kay will develop once Mother has died? Provide evidence from the text to support your opinion. [1 mark]