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Idylls of the King-A Masterpiece

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The Idylls of the King - A Master
piece

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Ava

by
O. Steele

1900

1900

Some say that
the poetry of the future
will disregard all its
old laws of melody
and measure, and
care nothing for
beauty of form; others
say ^{that} it will care for
nothing else, that it
will lose all its moral
meaning and leave
us no message for the
soul of man. Be this
as it may, the believers
in the older creed,
who stand midway
between these two - may
take comfort in the
discussion of these

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(2)

new teaching and lead-
ing them to fight out
the battle, not satisfied
with the belief that the
world will always
care for poetry that
is partial. This means
something unusual,
creative and ideal,
thereby enriching life.
Both the form and con-
tent must be of such
a character as to do this.
The subject must be-
long to poetry, that is to
say, it must move
the feelings as well as
appeal to the intellect;
it must have the element

(3)

of mystery as well as the
element of clearness. The
poet must make us feel
that he has something
to say, whatever the form
may be; that it is not
only worth saying, but
also fitted to give us pleas-
ure thro quickening
the emotions. The central
idea of the poem must
be vital and creative;
it must have power to
sustain itself in our ^{minds}
while we read; it must
be worked out coherently
and yet must suggest
that it belongs to a larger
truth, whose depths are

(4)

~~an~~ unexplored Poetry
is, in fact, a prophetic
art. It is an art, because
its first object is — to give
pleasure thro its perfec-
tion of form. Without
this perfection of form
the world would never
care for it. It is a prophetic
art, because it is to convey
to man's mind a mes-
sage from the unknown
that will lift him up,
and make him not
only happier but better.
The world will never be
fully satisfied with any-
thing less, and only those
soul's can bring a mes-

ing into life, "touch it
with a glory, and link
it to immortality, are
great poets."

A poem, to be a masterpiece must have these
elements; let it be our
part to show that Henry
son's Lullies of the King
are not wanting in
any one. The whole world
acknowledges that
person to be the master
of masterpieces, first
in rank. Milton follows
him, lower in the scale,
Henryson, if not the
third, at least has enough
of the characteristics

(6)

of these two, & class him
with the great poets.
There are points of si-
milarity between Milton
and Keats worthy
of consideration. There
is a greater likeness
in the fact than in the
expression of the great
practical question of
life. It comes in the
temper of the soul, and
in the same moral
purpose. Such likeness
can be seen between
Paradise Lost and
Syllable of the King. And
yet, beyond all question
Paradise Lost is our

of the most unique and
 inimitable poems ever
 written. But the same
 can be said of the Idylls.
 It was Milton, in truth,
 who first called attention
 to the legend of King Ar-
 thur as a fit subject
 for a great poem. He
 proposed writing a na-
 tional epic which would
 never die, but the de-
 sign was abandoned
 and given over to the
 one man who was
 able to carry it to com-
 pletion.

Both Milton and
 Tennyson understood

8

that rhyme was the
least important of the
elements of good poetry.
Milton was the first to
give it up. Many followed
him, but there were
failures. They pushed
forth strains of meas-
ured prose thinking
they were writing blank
verse. They resigned that
it was the only form of
verse which required
the most delicate ear
and the most tedious
labors.

Each of the poems
has its own distinctive
quality. In Milton we

Have more of a ma-
 jestic march, more
 rhythm; in Keats
 a sweeter and more
 perfect tone, more of
 melody. We may find
 some weak and in-
 effective lines in Milton
 while we may read The
 Lylle Thos and Thos, and
 find them more fin-
 ished, more expressive,
 more perfectly musical,
 as a work of art. They
 do not rise to Milton's
 loftiest heights, yet they
 do not fall to his lowest
 depths. We must acknowl-
 edge Keats's sustained

and varied display as
 a metrist, All those that
 told that his greatest
 achievement is that of the
 metrical artificer will
 agree ^{that} in a technical
 sense, at least, the Idylls
 are a masterpiece. He
 has turned his loop &
 every voice in Nature,
 and this has responded
 to every mood in man.
 It answers to the clank
 of spears, the roar of waters,
 and the railing of winds,
 In the words of one of
 his critics; "it came trip as
 lightly as the sandal-
 footed maiden, and

stride as starkly as the
warrior's mail-clad heel.
It can moan with the
conscience-stricken
Guinevere, or flash into
wrath with the outraged
Isolt or swell into a
storm of majestic melan-
choly of the dying King.
In a word, rhythm has
never been so magnifi-
cently displayed since
the times of Shakespeare.

In other charac-
teristics than rhythm, how-
ever, are the Lullaby notes
worthy as a work of
art. In beauty of diction,
richness of illustration

and portrayal of character, they are artistic. They are full of pictures that show how you studied Nature at first hand. Notice for instance his study of birds, he has seen

"Careful robin's eye the delver's tail;"

and listened to
"The great plover's human whistle,"

and noted at sunset,
"The lovely heron forgets
his melancholy,
Lies down his other leg,
and stretching dreams
Of goodly supper in the

distant pool,"

His landscapes are
 painted in few words,
 yet all that are needful
 to make the scene leap
 before the eyes;

"So thro' the green gloom
 of the wood they pass,
 And issuing under
 open heavens beheld
 A little town with towers,
 upon a rock,
 And close beneath, a nest
 or, gem-like chosed
 In the brown wild, and
 unwarred moving it;
 And down a rocky path
 way from the place,
 There came a fair-haired youth."

He can wish nothing out of and seldom anything into his descriptions. He rarely painted a landscape without humanity. He knew that Nature alone was not nearly so pleasing as Nature and man together.

Our is struck by the abundant and dramatic variety of his men and women. All are alive and recognizable at a glance. Racine in his double nature moves at a level with the King himself, in interest.

He sees the ceaseless inner
 war in his "disloyal loy-
 alty" to Guinevere.
 "The shock of an old
 love stricken him;
 His honour rooted in
 dishonour stood.
 And faith unfaithful
 kept him falsely true."
 The battle in his soul
 comes to a crisis in
 The Lull of Lancelot and
 Elaine. The unsuspectious-
 ness of The King makes
 him conscious of friend-
 ship failed and honor
 lost. This is finely worked
 out in the lines in which
 he analyses his inner

soul;

"For what am I? What
profits it my name of
greatest Knight?
I fought for it, and love
it;
Pleasure to love it, now;
to lose, pain;
Now grown a part of me;
but what use in it?
To make men worse
by making my sin
known?
Or sin seem less, The
sinners seeming great?
Alas for Arthur's greatest
Knight, a man
Not after Arthur's least! I
needs must break. These

Grudge that or defame
me. x x x x x

but if I would not,
then may God,
I pray him, send ~~me~~ ^{an}
angel down to seize
me by the hair and
bear me far
and fling me deep in
that forgotten ~~me~~
Among the troubled frag-
ments of the hills."

But then it all ~~how~~
lofty and great ~~it is~~!
No wonder that he "knew
not he should die a holy
man" and no wonder
also that he did so die,
He saw the same

tragic situation in the representation of Guinevere. In her youth she threw herself recklessly into her doom. The Admirer her husband, but was ever contrasting him with Lancelot. The central passage of her delineation is in Lancelot & Elaine, when Lancelot inquires if the King had said aught.

She broke into a little scornful laugh;
Arthur, my lord Arthur,
The faultless King,
That passionate perfection,

my good lord—

But who can gaze upon
the sun in Heaven?
He never spoke word
of reproach to me,
He never had a glimpse
of mine untruth,
He cares not for me;
only here today
there gleamed a roguish sus-
picion in his eyes;
Some meddling rogue
has tampered with him
else

Rapt in this fancy of his
Table Round,
and smothering men &
you impossible,
to make them like him.

self! But, friend, to me
 He is all fault & no fault
 no fault at all;
 For who loves me must
 Love a touch of error;
 The love even makes
 the colour; I am yours,
 Not Arthur's, as ye know,
 save by the bond."

and all this trouble
 grew until he could
 bear no more, and told
 Lancelot go, & are familiar
 with that speech of Arthur's
 spoken by our who was
 going to his death, and
 to the woman's ears, lov-
 ing the right and truth
 of dying words, this

breaks down her long
 love for another, and
 at last she loves Arthur.
 When she loves him she
 repents, but not until then.

And so we might
 go on from man &
 man, woman & woman,
 from the garrulous
 old Lord Daggon & the
 little Dagoret at the end
 with his pathetic love
 for King Arthur. But
 display of anything beau-
 ty of diction, vividness
 of scenes and charac-
 ters cannot redeem
 a poem if it have not
 the soul of greatness.

Thus, we find that since
 the seed of shame and
 death is the profound
 truth which both Milton
 and Tennyson bear
 witness of. And to teach
 this in forms of highest
 art is the imagin-
 ation of the human
 race was the moral
 purpose of both poets.
 Tennyson wished
 to write a national poem,
 also, and in this he
 meant to depict the mor-
 tal fate of the human race.
 He, too, was attracted by
 the mystical beauty of
 the Arthurian legends.

in these antique myths
 he desired & embodied
 his own theory of human
 life. He recognized that
 the only true history and
 the only true tragedy is
 the tragic history of the
 soul of man. The char-
 acter of Arthur is an
 ideal to which the poet
 desired us to aspire,
 and which he thought
 entirely possible to gain.
 The whole world ought
 to be better for this picture
 of a man, and the future
 will be grateful for it.
 Tennyson for it,
 I have here said

that the poem, as a whole, lacks unity; that it is made up of poems entirely separate. In answer to this, we must take into consideration the first impression they must have made on the people they were produced piece-meal and in a periodic fashion. The short poems, Lady of Shalott, Morte d'Arthur, Sir Galahad, and Sir Lancelot and Guinevere first appeared in these more sudden the deep conception of life and character, which the poet

afternoon worked out
 more fully and clearly
 in the longer poems.
 In the order of publica-
 tion, the last was the first,
 that is, the portion of it in-
 cluded in the *Moose &*
Arthur of 1842; this was
 followed successively
 by ^{the third} three, ^{the fifth} four, ^{the sixth &c} six, ten, one,
 seven, eight, eleven, two,
 nine, four. The public
 of course, could not
 estimate the poems in
 their right relations and
 at their true worth. Their
 beauty of imagery and
 versification were at
 once acknowledged,

But they were not received as a whole. It is, indeed, marvellous that a great poet should be engaged for more than half a century on his great theme, and produce the poems in such a confused order to which he always held the clue. He began with the end, continued with the middle, and brought forth, at last, a poem which has more epic grandeur and completeness than anything since Milton. The introduction of the Morte d'Arthur, which

is easily readable from
 across the lines, shows
 how thoroughly a great
 plan was already in
 the author's mind. The
 four Idylls as they
 first appeared, made
 as four separate pict-
 ures; each according
 to the character of its her-
 oine, with almost no
 remodeling, fell at
 once into their natural
 places as a part of a
 series. The remaining
 pictures, being by de-
 gree developed, were
 at last arranged in
 proper order and or-

quence, the back-ground, before which the actions of the poem pass, change from earliest spring to latest winter, and we find that all the seasons of the year, arm, turn by turn, set before us. To long, however, as their succession and connection was concealed, it was impossible to form any complete judgment of their meaning. He did not purpose to tell a single straightforward story for the sake of the story, or to bring together the

our book a mass of
 disconnected notes, each
 of which might just as
 well have stood alone,
 but his plan was to
 group about a single
 abstract a number
 of figures each of which
 should be just as finish-
 ed and complete as he
 could make it, none
 of which could be clear-
 ly understood except
 as it stood in its own
 place in the circle. Now
 that we perceive the *Idylls*
 all together standing in
 their proper order and
 relations; now that we

see that with their diversity they do indeed belong and revolve about the King, or are able to appropriate the force and grandeur of the poet's creative idea, which could sustain and guide him thro such long and intricate labor, and produce at last from an apparent chaos of material, an harmonious work of art of a new order.

There are two things to be observed when we consider the manner in which the poet has

used his material, (1) He has taken such liberties with the outlines of the story as were necessary for his own purpose, (2) He has put in to it, the thoughts and feelings of his own age.

We have only to read a few of Mallory's stories to see how bold and feeble they are as compared with Tennyson's. The Mallorys are such as to entitle them to rank among the best of English literature. Mallory has made the downfall of the Round Table and the death of

Arthur fallow a great
 wrong that the King
 himself had committed.
 Thus the story becomes
 a tragedy of Nemesis.
 Henryson has entirely
 eliminated this element,
 and traces the ruin of
 the Kingdom to other causes.
 The first and introductory
 Idyll indicates the awak-
 ing and recognition
 of the soul, or the ensuing
 Idylls show how its
 influence farre-reaches
 or waves-in the great
 battle of life. Thus all we
 see the body and its pos-
 sessions, represented by

The Knights of the Round Table, gain continually greater power, till in the end, the spirit's earthly work is thwarted and defeated by the flesh. Its immortality alone remains and with this a deathless hope.

From the early spring breezes of Growth, and the story of Geraint and Enid where the first gust of prison and base suspicion is felt, we find yet, a great and simple heart left pure. Next, in Merlin and Vivien, we see a great wit and

genius succumb, and
 in Lancelot and Elaine,
 the early death of vir-
 tues and hope result
 from it. In The Holy Grail
 we find religion itself
 under the stress of it and
 despite the efforts of the
 soul - passes into super-
 stition. The story of corrupt-
 ion culminates in Pelleas
 and Ettarre, the last of the
 flesh is all but paramount.
 Then comes the "autumn
 dripping gloom" of The Last
 Tournament with its
 awful close, and then in
 Guinevere comes the
 final stroke, leaving

to the soul a broken heart
 for company. Thus ends
 the story of the Round Table
 and the story of the life-
 long labor of the soul.
 There remains but the
 passing of the spirit,
 from the great deep to
 the great deep, the "last
 dimm'd virginal battle, fought
 in the densest mist, stands
 for a picture of all human
 death, the soul, alone, en-
 during beyond all else,
 sees the mist clear away
 and finds those three
 assumed virtues, "abiding
 to convey it to its rest,"

In giving such sig-

significance & the legends,
 Pennington has kept
 closer to their spirit
 than is at first apparent.
 For they attempted to
 make Arthur the ideal
 man. He was amply
 justified then by an-
 cient precedent, in
 making Arthur an
 ideal King, and also
 in moulding his ma-
 terial to suit his purpose.
 If he has chosen to
 make a parable of
 the soul - to paint a
 "Glamorous" King, he
 has done deliberately
 what the ancient wi-

did unconsciously
and in fact,

We shall not further
question his right there,
in choosing or selecting
from his mass of
materials such parts
as were necessary
for his purpose. But is
he also justifiable in
making his people dis-
cuss problems and
express sentiments of
the nineteenth century?
Questions of philosophy
and morality he
makes his characters
discuss which were
totally unknown to the

Middle Ages. Notice for example, Merlin's triplet in *The Coming of Arthur*,
 "Rain, rain and sun,
 A rainbow on the sea,
 And truth is this to me,
 and that to thee!
 And truth or clothed or
 naked let it be."

These are words of the modern philosophy, who holds that all knowledge is relative, and has to do only with phenomena, and that reality is unknowable. The idea, also, expressed in *The Holy Grail* of the true religion - This was not

known in the sixth century.

Whether this be right or wrong depends upon the view we take of the poet's purpose. If it is historical, he has no right to have characters of Middle Ages expressing thoughts of Modern times. But, if his object is to bring out the meaning of human life; to make his power vital; and to make his people more in such a way as to move our feelings and appeal to our intellect, which is my claim to be true, then he

is not only right, but in
 no other way could he
 make a great poem
 about Arthur and the
 legends of the Round Table.
 In order to make
 them represent living
 ideas and types of
 character was to put
 into them his own thoughts.
 This he has done so
 successfully, that we
 would not have it changed.

His means of doing
 this is the allegory.
 From the first reading
 of Malloy's King Arthur,
 the vision of a great
 poem rose before him.

Schemes for its treatment are still extant, and show with what tenacity his original purpose clung to him. As early as 1853, we have a manuscript which shows a set allegorical ^{plan} ~~purpose~~. We find this to be far more allegorical than the present form. Not until some twenty years later did he give up part of the allegorical plan and decide upon the final shape of the poem.

Many of his critics think his poem should be either purely romance

or purely allegory, and
 say that it is not clearly
 either. But we must
 take the words of the
 poet himself as a clue
 to the interpretation.

"Accept this old imperfect
 tale

New-old, and shadowing
 sense at war with sound,
 Rather than that gray
 King, whose name, a
 ghost,

stream like a cloud,
 man-shaped, from moun-

tain peaks
 And climes to air
 and somewhat still;
 or him

Of Geoffrey's book, or here
 of Mallers, our
 touched by the adulterous
 Guinever of a time
 What have'd but
 nor and wantonness,
 And errandings and
 detestments,"

This is a clear disavowal
 of any historic pur-
 pose, nor does it mean
 that they are allegory,
 pure and simple. Tenny-
 son, himself said in
 speaking of his critics,
 "They took taken my
 Lolly and ridded
 it to hand and have
 explained some things

too allegorically, tho
 there is an allegorical,
 or perhaps, rather a
 parabolic drift in the
 poem. For instance,
 Camelot, a city of chival-
 -ry places, is every-
 where symbolic of the
 gradual growth of human
 beliefs, institutions and
 of spiritual develop-
 ment of man. Yet, there
 is no single fact in
 the *Syllable*, however
 seemingly mystical,
 which cannot be ex-
 plained as without
 any mystery or allegory
 whatever.

There are passages
 Thompson himself ac-
 knowledge more
 allegorical than others,
 The Lady of the Lake, for
 example, symbolizes
 the Church, and gives
 the soul its oh-spect
 and most splendid
 earthly weapon, the
 sword Excalibur, with
 which the soul wars
 against its enemies.
 And also, the three
 fair and mystic queens,
 "Hail, with bright sweet
 faces", robed in colors
 sacred to Faith, Hope,
 and charity, these stand

surely, ^{for} the three virtues
 upon which the soul
 leans when deserted by
 all else. The passage
 also in the Holy Grail
 where Percivale is allur-
 ed from his quest by
 his appetite under fig-
 ure of orchards full
 of luscious fruits; then
 by domestic love, under
 figure of a woman
 spinning at a cottage
 door; then by wealth,
 under figure ^{of a city} which
 is in its splendor,

Any one can see
 The difference between
 These and The young

and Lapsful Growth
 riding over the fields
 with the petulant Lynette
 The attempt to interpret
 the poem as a strict
 allegory in every part
 breaks down and
 spoils the story. The many
 say Arthur is the soul,
 Guinevere, the heart, Lan-
 cet the manliness in man,
 Merlin, the intellect—but
 there is no reason to at-
 tempt to carry this out
 in every character. Let
 us not look for too
 much, let us take the
 King's people as actual
 men and women, and

when we throw ourselves into the story, and let it carry us along, then we understand that it is more of a parable, that it throws beside itself an image, a reflection of something spiritual. When we look at the story in this light, and follow out Verne's true intention, we are not troubled by the confusion of attempting to interpret allegorically every part of the story.

This Sylble of The King, then, is a master-

piece in poetic expres-
 sion and in its unity
 and 'harmony, complete.
 It is a masterpiece in
 yet another, and high-
 er and more poetic
 element; this is wherein
 it has "traced life
 with a glory and linked
 it to immortality". More
 human nature has
 become subordinated
 to the spiritual, and the
 spiritual has become
 a reality. The divine
 essence of the soul,
 its inner life, its mys-
 terious passing to a
 world where it is re-

ceived with loud ac-
 claim, are visions
 of the poet's faith, But
 still nearer to our
 lives is the vision
 of the Holy Grail, the
 Knights' pursuit "wan-
 dering fairs" - only
 found attainments the
 vision, the King him-
 self is found in the
 midst of human life,
 in lowest form of men,
 where spirituality, pure
 holiness and the love
 which 'beholds the in-
 visible Kingdom, is
 found, He beholds ^{sees} God
 not as a vision, but

face to face.

"This book ----- being done
 Let visions of the night
 and of the day
 Come, as They will; and
 many a time They come,
 Until This earth he walks
 on seems not earth,
 In moments when he
 feels he cannot die
 And knows himself
 no vision to himself,
 Nor the high God a vision,
 nor that Our
 Who rose again; ye have
 seen what ye have seen,
 This poem then
 certainly satisfies
 the requirements of the

Highest art. What The porter
himself, designed for
his best work, and what
called the greatest of
all poetic subjects, we
must acknowledge
to be the most striking
and characteristic art-
work of the nineteenth
century. A model of po-
etic form. It will live
not only by the magic
of its execution, but by
the greatness of its
divine conception.

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