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### Sample MonkeyNotes

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# *The Crystal Cave*

by

Mary Stewart  
1970



MonkeyNotes by Diane Clapsaddle

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The novel is set around 450 A.D., one of the darkest periods of Britain's history. It begins in Wales in the town of Maridunum, but branches out into various areas of Britain and Less Britain (Brittany) in what is.....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**Merlin** - The main character and narrator of the novel, he is the young boy who has the Sight and .....

**Ambrosius** - Merlin's father, he becomes the High King of Britain after defeating Vortigern and .....

**Niniane** - Merlin's mother, she has a forbidden affair with Ambrosius from which comes Merlin. She.....

**Uther** - Ambrosius' brother and Arthur's father, he becomes High King at Ambrosius' death. Merlin uses.....

**Gorlois** - The Duke of Cornwall, he is ultimately loyal to Ambrosius and fights with him to.....

**Ygraine** - The Duchess of Cornwall, she gives into her lust for Uther and agrees to.....

**Galapas** - The hermit with the Sight who helps Merlin find the crystal cave and teaches him all.....

**Camlach** - Niniane's brother and briefly King of Maridunum, he sides with Vortimer .....

**Vortigern** - High King of Britain when Merlin is a boy, he steals the throne from Constantius by.....

**Cadal** - Merlin's loyal servant, he dies at Tintagel, protecting Merlin from.....

#### Minor Characters

**Merlin's Grandfather** - The king of Maridunum at the beginning of the novel, he despises.....

**Olwen** - Merlin's grandfather's young wife, she plays the harp and teaches .....

**Dinias** - Merlin's cousin and his grandfather's bastard son, he bullies Merlin as .....

**Moravik** - Merlin's nurse

**Cerdic** - A servant in Merlin's grandfather's house, who becomes a kind of father.....

**King Budec** - King of Less Britain, he takes in the young Ambrosius and Uther .....

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. He or she must usually overcome some opposing force. This is Merlin who, as the narrator, re-tells the story of his mission to bring about the conception of Arthur. We are shown his life from a .....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist of a story is the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. The antagonist does not always have to be a single character or even a character at all. In this story, the antagonist is Merlin's god or God. Merlin is always in conflict with the god's needs and even though he eventually .....

**Climax** - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. The climax in this story does not occur until the end when Merlin kills Brithael so that.....

**Outcome** - In the end, Merlin is blamed by the Uther for the deaths of the four men at Tintagel, even though it was Uther who demanded that Merlin bring him Ygraine. He then repudiates Merlin, forbids .....

## **SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

The novel begins with a Prologue in which Merlin introduces himself as an old man remembering all the events of his life. He presents his greatest memory in the prologue as well which details the love affair in the cave between his parents who we will learn later are Ambrosius and Niniane.

The novel is divided into five books which unfold as follows:

Book I – The Dove tells the story of Merlin’s early years. We learn how is despise in his grandfather’s house because his father is unknown and he is a bastard unrecognized. He begins to become aware of his power of the Sight and how to use it to his own advantage.

We are introduced to his uncle, Camlach, who tries to poison Merlin, because he fears his power. He discovers the crystal cave and meets Galapas, another person his life besides his mother who has the gift of the Sight. Galapas teaches him many aspects of life as well as how to use magic. He takes him into the crystal cave where Merlin has a vision of a deep mine underground where slaves are breaking out rock and taking them to the surface. He will later know that this mine lies under Dinas Brenin and will be the reason why the fortress being built there won’t stand. Galapas later insists that Merlin ride along with his grandfather when he meets up with Vortigern, the High King, at Segontium. Here, Merlin first sees the hill that will become Dinas Brenin or the King’s Fort. This place will be the one where Merlin nearly gives his life for a blood superstition.

This section of the novel also introduces the tension in the country, because the sons of Vortigern have broken with him and war is imminent. Quarrels break out between Camlach and Merlin’s grandfather over whose side to take. Then, Merlin’s grandfather is killed in a fall and Merlin’s beloved servant, Cerdic, is blamed and killed as well. Merlin sees all this in a vision at the crystal cave. Merlin returns to his home long enough to pack supplies and burn down his room where Cerdi’s body lies. This will be his way of sending his friend “on his way” in the manner he would have wanted.

After Merlin runs away, he is kidnapped by Marric and Hanno, two spies of Ambrosius, who.....

## **THEMES**

**Destiny or Fate** - The theme of destiny or fate is strongly prevalent throughout this novel. All the characters are controlled by the god/God who with great determination moves them like figures on a.....

Other themes are discussed in the full MonkeyNotes Study Guide

## **MOOD**

The mood is frequently one of mystery. The most explosive scenes take place in darkness and.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

Mary Florence Elinor Stewart was born in Sunderland, England on September 17, 1916. She began writing at the age of five, when she published her first poem in a small parish magazine in England. She received a Bachelors degree in English with honors from Durham University in 1938. She later completed her Masters degree at Durham as well. In 1945 she married Sir Frederick Stewart. Before beginning working as a writer full time, she returned to Durham University as an English professor. Mary Stewart has lived.....

## LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The author is careful to tell the reader in *Author's Note* at the end of the novel that she has included Latin, Breton, Welsh and even modern names for places in this work as a means of putting the reader at ease. Sometimes, she even uses two or three names to identify her setting. The same is true with the .....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND NOTES

### PROLOGUE – The Prince of Darkness

(the significance of the title: it refers both to the young man who is Merlin's father, Ambrosius, King of Less Britain and to Merlin himself who is feared for his Sight and his magical abilities.)

#### Summary

The narrator speaks in flashback as an old man who has now come full circle, back to just being a man with a few tricks. His implication is that he no longer wields the magic he once did. He discusses how memories that are recent are more misted than those of the past and that they unfold like the pictures in the mind of the other person he was as a child. He indicates that he recovers his memories from the fire, one of the last tricks he is still able to do, or from dreams or from the mirrors of the crystal cave, all-important elements of foreshadowing.

He speaks of the first memory of all as one that is not his own, but rather one recalled from him who once bore the narrator in his body, the one who "was before me and who will be again when I am gone," a statement of complete and utter mystery, hearkening to the reader's knowledge of Arthur as "the once and future king."

He then shows the reader that first memory of a young man of eighteen who had been hiding in a cave from the pursuit of those who would kill him if they found him. The young man is a king's son as evidenced by his horse's gilded bit and the strips of silk he had used to keep it from jingling. The young man hears some hoofs and lifts his sword in anticipated defense, but the rider is no enemy. Rather, it is a young girl who indicates that she had an impossible time coming to him since his pursuers were on the roads night and day. She has brought him "things" and only realizes he is leaving after he kisses her and covers her hands with his own.

The girl insists he will come back, because she has the Sight. He says only that he must come back and that then, maybe she will listen. They spend the last hour or two they have left together in the cave.

#### Notes

It is only after reading Book I that the reader will realize that this is the scene where Merlin is conceived. We are not privy to the young man's identity, only that he is being pursued by some enemy who would kill him if he could. This leads us then to the conclusion that Merlin's mother had created a relationship with a man totally unacceptable to her family. Later, we will learn that the young man is Ambrosius, King of Less Britain or Brittany.

The couple has evidently discussed the impossibility of their relationship and he has probably tried to convince her to leave with him, something she has refused to do. Her love for him must be quite strong, however, given that she has ridden to him, even as he was being sought by his enemies, to provide him with "things" not identified. The implication is that they have been meeting secretly for some time and only when she sees his saddlebags packed is she aware that he is forced to leave.

The final words of the Prologue are laced with a terrible sense of finality and the reader is left with the feeling that they will never see each other again.

The mysterious mood of the Prologue (one which will continue throughout the book) is set by the atmosphere of secrecy – the night is misty and dark as are many of the memories of the narrator; the narrator is, for the moment, unknown as are his reasons for relating all that came from the past; the events which have led to the

scene between the young couple are vague and incomplete; questions the reader may have are left unanswered; and the meaning of the title of the Prologue is not yet able to be determined. Who is the Prince of Darkness and what is the significance of his story? Once again, Book I will answer some questions, one of which is the significance of the title – The Prince of Darkness is both Ambrosius and Merlin and this young couple are Ambrosius and Niniane.

## **BOOK I – The Dove**

(the significance of the title: Cerdic teaches Merlin to be the ring-dove and run away from danger since he is yet so young and unable to face what might harm him)

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **Summary**

The narrator is but a six year old boy when the main part of the story opens. His memory concerns the return home of his uncle, Camlach, his mother's brother, both of whom have beautiful blue eyes and red hair. His nurse, Moravik makes him ready for someone of importance whose men speak Celtic. We learn the identity of the important visitor and that the narrator's grandfather is the king of Maridunum, a city where they live in South Wales.

The narrator also reveals that, besides Welsh, he knows Breton, the language of Less Britain, because Moravik, his nurse, is a native of that land. Pieces of information about Camlach are revealed through the narrator's questions to his mother: the war is over and Camlach has been with the High King in the south; Camlach's older brother, Dyved, has died of stomach cramps; Camlach will now be expected to marry; the narrator is called *Merlin* by his mother; Merlin seems to know more information than he should; and Camlach and his father will come to see Merlin. When Merlin questions why they would want to see him, his mother merely answers both mysteriously and bitterly, "Why do you think?"

Camlach and Merlin's grandfather arrive, the elder in blue and the younger in black, a color he always wears. The King reveals that Merlin is a bastard who neither looks nor acts anything like his family. He also explains that Merlin's mother will not reveal the identity of his father, even though she was whipped until she nearly miscarried him. It is interesting to note that Camlach had come to see Merlin even before he had washed away the dirt of travel. What makes this six year old boy so interesting?

When asked his name, Merlin answers with the Welsh *Myrddin Emrys*. His second name means child of light, belonging to the gods, while his first name in its Latin form *Merlinus* means falcon. Camlach addresses his sister as Niniane and is amused when she won't reveal Merlin's father's name. The King's contempt for both her and Merlin is quite evident. He says even the High King, Vortigern, would have found nothing in Merlin's father or him.

Merlin tells us that he went through the hypocaust, the tunnels of the disused heating system, that night. It seemed to be a secret place where he could hide and be alone and even eavesdrop. But, he tells the reader, he went there to be alone in the "secret dark, where a man is his own master, except for death."

In this way, he learns that Camlach and his men had ridden in from Cornwall. From the conversation between Camlach and his right-hand man, Alun, the reader also learns tidbits about Merlin's mother perhaps refusing someone and having her mind set on a higher court, which may be a blessing to Camlach before the "game" is played out. Also, he describes Merlin in such terms as "clever . . . nice enough . . . and keeping him close to me . . . and remember that, Alun; I like the boy . . ."

The chapter ends with Merlin stating that this was the beginning of it and that he followed Camlach everywhere for days.

## Notes

Merlin's understanding of Breton is an important piece of foreshadowing for later in the story.

His mother is suspicious of all that Merlin seems to know, perhaps because, as we will learn later, she, too, has the Sight.

Merlin is interesting to both us and his family, because he doesn't look like them and his father's name is unknown.

Merlin's name has symbolic significance: his first name, meaning falcon, implies strength and cunning and his second name reminds us of goodness, characteristics which will be revealed over and over as the story unfolds. The secrets yet unknown about Niniane and who she will marry are intriguing while Merlin's final sentence – "This was the beginning of it. . ." – make us wonder just what "it" is – and if we have any understanding of the Arthur legend we come to the conclusion that it is the conception and birth of the greatest king of Britain, Arthur.

**We learn new names in this chapter:** Niniane, Merlin's mother; Vortigern, the High King; Maridunum, the city where Merlin lives; and Moravik, his nurse.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### THE LEGEND

Mary Stewart, the author, re-tells the original legend to show where she found the source for this first book of the Arthurian Saga. She ends this chapter by telling us that Uther Pendragon would reign fifteen more years without ever seeing his son, Arthur. Just as Merlin predicted, Arthur would be give to him .....

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Merlin** - Merlin's character is presented in a completely unexpected way. The legend portrays him as a mysterious enchanter, but Mary Stewart presents him as first a boy and then, a man who has feelings and.....

**Ambrosius** - As Merlin's father, he is unknown and unknowable in the beginning, because Niniane refuses to reveal his identity. So, for Merlin, he is a mysterious figure to whom he cannot .....

**Niniane** - Merlin's mother is a mysterious character as well. As a young girl, she has an affair with Ambrosius, who is her father's enemy, but, even though she loves him, she remains loyal to her father and refuses.....

**Uther** - Uther is a tool, according to Merlin, and Ygraine is a vessel intended to create Arthur and.....

**Gorlois** - The Duke of Cornwall is depicted as a man betrayed. He comes to the.....

**Ygraine** - She is depicted as a young woman who has been living in the loneliness of Cornwall, married to a much older man. Once she arrives at Uther's court, she gets a taste of a more exciting life and.....

**Cadal** - Merlin's servant can be judged as the most loyal and loving person, next to Ambrosius, in Merlin's life. He stands by Merlin through every step of his journey from Less Britain to Britain to Cornwall.....

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The novel is divided into five parts to portray the progression of Merlin's story from boyhood to prophet and each one is entitled with important symbols. Book I – the Dove is symbolic of Merlin's need to run away until he is old enough to fight his battles; Book II – The Falcon symbolizes Merlin's step towards manhood and the strength he must gain to fulfill the wishes of the gods; Book III – the Wolf symbolizes.....

## THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

The **theme of destiny or fate** is most important in understanding the novel. The characters are like figures on a chess board, constantly being manipulated by the gods. Merlin is a great enchanter, but he is powerless to stop the will of the gods. For example, when he falls in love with Keri, the young nun, he.....

Other themes are discussed in the full MonkeyNotes Study Guide.

## RISING ACTION

The rising action begins with Merlin's discovery of his Sight and his destiny at the hand of the gods. We see him grow into a strong young man in the court of Ambrosius in.....

## FALLING ACTION

The falling action is seen in the final pages of the novel. Merlin comes down to the shore, wounded and heartsick at the death of Britnael. There he finds Cadal who he believes is dead. He carefully covers.....

## POINT OF VIEW

The entire point of view is first person. Merlin is the narrator, so we see all the action from his perspective. All the characters are fleshed out by his observations and so take on his perspective of the.....

## OTHER ELEMENTS

**IRONY** - One other element that is evident is the sense of irony that at times runs through the book. For example, it is ironic that Merlin's name means Prince of Light, but he is always referred to.....

**VOCABULARY** - The vocabulary is another interesting element. Stewart tells us in her *Author's Note* that she has incorporated many languages to name places and people, because so many cultures were at work here at the time: the Romans and Latin, the Welsh, the Bretons and Old French, the Britons and Old English and even the Saxons and the Germans. For example, the men of Cornwall, South Wales, and Brittany are also known as the Dumnonii, Demetae, and the Armoricans.

**NATIONALITIES** - The various **nationalities** – Romans, Bretons, Welsh, Britains, Irish, Saxons,.....

## QUOTES - IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS

The following quotations are important at various points in the story:  
(Source: A Reprint of William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980/ First Eos trade paperback published 2003)

1. **“What mattered to me - I see it clearly now – was to be alone in the secret dark, where a man is his own master, except for death.”** (p. 18)

This quote, spoken by Merlin as narrator, reveals the solitude that Merlin both craved and feared through out his life.

2. **“... the god was there first and if I have his hill now, it is because he shares it with me.”** (p. 22)

Merlin is saying that he has always been in the hands of the god and no matter that the hill and the cave feel like his home, he must always share it with the One who first gave him his power.....

## SYMBOLISM/MOTIFS/IMAGERY/SYMBOLS

**The Crystal Cave** - This place represents his home and where Merlin finds his power and has his first vision.

**The King-Star** - This symbol appears in the sky many times to lead Merlin on the right path. It is in the constellation of the bear, arctos, which further symbolizes Arthur.

**The Ring-Dove** - This bird which runs away from danger represents Merlin.....

## IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

**Title:** The Crystal Cave

**Author:** Mary Stewart

**Date Published:** 1970

**Meaning of the Title:** Refers to the place where Merlin first discovers and accepts his power and his Sight. It will also be the place where he has important visions and where he will meet his end.

**Setting:** Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century as well as Wales, Less .....

## STUDY QUESTIONS / QUIZ

- Merlin learns of his power and sees his first vision in
  - Maridunum
  - the crystal cave
  - Tintagel
- Merlin's vision of a man and a young girl in a cave is actually
  - a vision of his own conception
  - a vision of Arthur's conception.....

## ANSWER KEY

1. b 2. a 3. c 4. c 5. c 6. a 7. a 8. b 9. c 10. b 11. a 12. a 13. c 14. b 15. a

## VOCABULARY LIST

### Book 1

Adit - to slowly examine

Contrive - to scheme

Coracle - a small boat

Culvert - a drain for a road.....

## ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

- Analyze the character of Merlin as he progresses and grows into his power.
- Explain life during the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD in Britain from the following angles: social classes, occupations, religions, and politics.....

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