

## LITERATURE

In this section, we'll learn about a couple of famous literary references found in the Harry Potter books, but two very famous magical people in English literary history: Merlin and Morgan. Both Merlin and Morgan are featured on a Chocolate Frog wizard card, both are famous magicians, and both have a place in our real world through the legend of King Arthur. Finally, we'll read about Beowulf, the oldest and one of the most famous stories in all of British literature. In it Beowulf fights two monsters and a dragon just like Harry fights the monster basilisk and steals treasure guarded by the dragon at Gringott's.

### **Macbeth and the Weird Sisters**

***In Harry Potter*** the Weird Sisters are a musical group. They played at the Hogwarts Yule Ball in *The Goblet of Fire*.

***In Literature***, in the Shakespeare tragedy *Macbeth* (written in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century), Macbeth was a military leader and hero who encountered three witches known as the "Weird Sisters." They told him a prophecy concerning his future. They told him he would become first the Thane of Cawdor (a "thane" is much like an English "earl"), and then the King of Scotland. This prophecy about his becoming king of Scotland made Macbeth crazy with ambition. He killed the current King, Duncan, and several other people who could have posed a problem for Macbeth becoming king. The Weird Sisters told a prophecy about how Macbeth would die:

- He was to “beware the Thane of Fife”
- “None of woman born/shall harm Macbeth”
- “Macbeth shall never be vanquished until/Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/shall come against him.”

Because of these prophecies Macbeth thought he was invincible. How likely was it that the Woods would fight against him? However, things turned out just like the prophecy claimed:

- Macbeth was killed by the Thane of Fife
- The Thane of Fife was born from a C-Section (not of woman born)
- The army that attacked Macbeth's castle of Dunsinane disguised themselves behind branches of trees. Thus “Birnam Wood” marched on Dunsinane.
- Macbeth was killed and beheaded by the Thane of Fife, just like the Weird Sisters predicted.

---

***Harry Potter Connection!*** Professor Trelawney gives a prophecy to Dumbledore about Voldemort and Harry that comes true. She also goes into a trance while he was taking his Divination final exam and tells Harry that the Dark Lord will rise again. That prophecy came true too. Just like the Weird Sisters.

---

## **Voldemort and the Picture of Dorian Gray**

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel published in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Oscar Wilde. In the book, Dorian Gray, an extremely attractive young man, believed that the only things worthwhile in life were beauty and pleasing the senses. Dorian asked a painter friend to paint a picture of him that would age for him, and his wish was granted. Dorian ended up living a life of indulgence and every sin he committed showed up in his portrait—the Dorian in the portrait either aged or became disfigured with every sin (including murder) the real Dorian committed. The physical Dorian stayed young and beautiful. In the end Dorian went crazy and stabbed the painting. The physical Dorian Gray died horribly disfigured while the painting reverted to its original form.

Lord Voldemort, though not coveting youth and beauty, did covet immortality to an unnatural degree. Like Dorian Gray, Voldemort attempted to put his soul into another form—the Horcruxes. The Horcruxes served the same purpose as Dorian Gray's painting; they held his soul and allowed him to commit murder and other awful acts. Dorian Gray stayed young and beautiful while his painting revealed the ugliness of his soul. Voldemort ripped his soul through murder to create the Horcruxes and it showed in his real face. The more evil he became, the more hideous and snake-like he looked. As he murdered he lost the youthful attractive look of Tom Riddle, and became the monstrous Lord Voldemort. In the end, like Dorian Gray's painting, once the Horcruxes were destroyed, Voldemort was destroyed as well.

## **Granger in Fahrenheit 451**

As we know, Hermione's last name is Granger. There is an important character named Granger in the well-known classic novel, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. In this novel, books and knowledge are considered dangerous, so firemen are not employed to put out fires, but to burn books. It is illegal to own books. The main character of the novel, Guy Montag, is a fireman who decides that books and knowledge are not bad things, so he leaves his job and runs away. When he does, he meets a man, Granger, who is the leader of a group of travelers called the Book People. The Book People are devoted to remembering and memorizing what they've read in books. They preserve literature and knowledge, they do not destroy it. Rather than distrusting knowledge, the Book People believe that knowledge is necessary to keep society stable.

A better fitting last name for Hermione, I could not imagine. If there is anyone in the Harry Potter world, other than Dumbledore, who values books and knowledge, it is Hermione Granger.

In one scene in *Fahrenheit 451*, Granger says this about the coming revolution, "We'll pass the books on to our children, by word of mouth, and let our children wait, in turn, on the other people. A lot will be lost that way, of course. But you can't make people listen. They have to come round in their own time..."

It is easy to imagine Hermione saying something like this!

## **King Arthur, Merlin, and Morgan le Fay**

One of the most famous and often told stories in all of Western literature is the story of King Arthur. In his story are two of the most famous

magicians of legend—Merlin and Morgan. Merlin and Morgan are also featured in Harry Potter on the Chocolate Frog wizard cards as a famous witch and wizard. Ron and Arthur Weasley also use Merlin's name as an exclamation: “Merlin's beard!” is a common one.

Merlin is the wizard on which so many literary wizards are based and Morgan is the sorceress who everyone loves to hate. Here are their stories:

### **Merlin**

The fictional Merlin was created by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century and the Merlin character we recognize from books and movies was continued by Thomas Malory in the 15th century with *Le Morte d'Arthur (The Death of Arthur)*.

### **Merlin and Vortigern**

In Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*, Merlin was a child of a noble mother and unidentified father. The father was some kind of spirit, possibly an incubus. We first meet Merlin because he helped King Vortigern. Vortigern knew that his kingdom was going to be overrun by the Saxons, so his magicians (probably Druids) advised Vortigern to flee to a remote place and to build a tower in which he could retreat. Vortigern did this, but unfortunately, every time the masons built the tower it would collapse the next day. Vortigern asked his magicians about the problem and was told that he had to sprinkle the blood of an "unfathered" boy on the stones of the tower. Messengers were sent out to find an "unfathered" boy, they discovered Merlin, and he was brought before Vortigern. But, instead of being sacrificed, Merlin told Vortigern that the problem with his tower was that the masons were building it on

top of a pool of water. Merlin told Vortigern to have the pool drained, and his tower would stand. A very practical solution! When Vortigern found that the tower really did sit on top of a pool of water, he believed Merlin was a magician and did not have him killed.

---

***Harry Potter Connection!*** In *The Half Blood Prince*, Dumbledore discovered, that to get into the cave where Voldemort's locket Horcrux was stored, he would have to drip some blood onto the stones. Only with blood would the secret reveal and the cave open. Dumbledore tells Harry that using blood in that way is old and crude.

---

Merlin then told Vortigern a prophecy. When Vortigern had the pool of water drained Merlin told him he'd find two hollow stones and in those two stones there would be two dragons—a white dragon and a red dragon. The red dragon symbolized the people of Britain and the white dragon symbolized the Saxons, the Germanic people whom Vortigern invited to Britain to help him destroy his enemies. Unfortunately for Vortigern the Saxons were also trying to overthrow *him*. According to Merlin, the white dragon would defeat the red dragon *at first*, but in time the red dragon would defeat the white dragon. The defeat of the red dragon over the white would be final.

---

**History Fact!** Throughout history, English Kings have flown flags with the red dragon emblem. In modern times, the Welsh flag is emblazoned with a red dragon.

---

Vortigern was killed by poison and Uther Pendragon eventually became the leader of the Britains (his brother Ambrosius ruled for a short time before succumbing to poison himself). The name Pendragon means either "head dragon" or "dragon head." Uther took this name because of Merlin's prophecy about the dragons and used a dragon as his emblem.

---

**Fun Fact!** During the reign of Ambrosius it is said that Merlin was responsible for gathering and erecting the monument of Stonehenge. He must have had considerable powers!

---

### **Merlin and Uther Pendragon**

Uther fell in love with one of his Dukes', the Duke of Cornwall's, wife Igraine. He lavished attention on her and this upset the Duke of Cornwall (Gorlois) so much that he left court and sent Igraine to his well-fortified castle, Tintagel. Gorlois himself went to another castle. Tintagel castle

was built high above the sea surrounded on all sides by water. Plus, there were armed soldiers all around. Definitely a problem for Uther!

Uther decided to enlist the help of Merlin. Merlin had a potion that would make Uther look just like Gorlois, and in that way he could get to Igraine. Uther succeeded in gaining access to the castle and visited Igraine. She thought Uther was her husband Gorlois and so let him into her rooms. At the same time that Uther was with Igraine, Uther's soldiers killed Gorlois in a battle at his other castle. The death of Gorlois made Igraine available and she and Uther were married. She gave birth to Arthur, who would eventually become the King Arthur of legend.

---

***Harry Potter Connection!*** Harry, Ron, and Hermione use the Polyjuice Potion, a potion similar to what Merlin used for Uther, on several occasions. They use it to sneak into the Slytherin common room, to infiltrate the Ministry of Magic, and to break into Gringots. It works much the same as Merlin's magic potion—turning the drinker into the likeness of another person.

---

## **Merlin and Arthur**

### ***Arthur's Birth and Fostering***

In the 15th century the story of Merlin and King Arthur continued with the book *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. Malory took the tale



of Merlin and Uther from Geoffrey, so it is basically the same as the above. However, Merlin played a larger role here than in Geoffrey's tale. Merlin agreed to help Uther gain access to Igraine on one condition—the child of Uther and Igraine be given up to him upon the baby's birth. Merlin accompanied Uther to Igraine disguised as one of Gorlois's knights. When Arthur was born, Merlin showed up at the castle disguised as a poor man, took him from Uther and Igraine, and gave him to a good and loyal knight, Sir Ector, and his family to raise.

### ***The Sword in the Stone***

When Uther fell sick he swore to Merlin in front of many of his knights that his son Arthur would be king after him. However, the men did not know about Arthur, because he was living with Sir Ector, so when Uther died the realm fell into chaos. Many of the leaders fought and claimed to be the King of England. Merlin went to the Archbishop of Canterbury and told him to call all the men of the realm to Canterbury for Christmas on pain of being cursed. There they would be shown a "miracle" to prove the rightful king (a miracle created by Merlin). All the men came. While they were in church the "miracle" happened—a large stone appeared with an anvil on the top and in that anvil was a sword thrust up to the hilt. On it was written, "whosoever pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England."

This is the part of the story that almost everyone has heard: Arthur pulling the sword out of the stone. When all the men came out of the castle and saw the sword in the stone, they all tried to pull it out, but none could do it. They tried and tried for hours, but the sword didn't budge. Finally, they gave up and held a jousting tournament for sport. Arthur was there with Sir Ector and his son Kay as Kay's squire. Kay wanted to participate in the tournament but had forgotten his sword in their tent, so he sent Arthur to fetch it. Arthur couldn't get into the tent,

and since he didn't want to return to Kay without his sword, he decided to try pulling the sword out of the stone. He pulled and it came out easily. Arthur took the sword to Kay who recognized it immediately. Only Sir Ector (and Merlin) knew that Arthur was Uther's son, and the rightful heir to the throne, so the other kings didn't believe that he could have released the sword. They made him put it back. Arthur put the sword back in the stone where it held fast. The other kings tried again and again to pull it out but they couldn't. Arthur stepped up and pulled the sword out easily once again and was declared High King.

---

***Harry Potter Connection!*** Harry pulled the sword of Griffindor out of the Sorting Hat when he fought Tom Riddle and the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. Only a true Griffindor, loyal to Dumbledore could do that. Like Arthur, Harry proves himself worthy of the magical item.

---

### **Merlin as Counselor and Protector**

Unfortunately for Arthur, not all of the other kings (of Scotland and other lands) were happy that a young boy with no known noble blood should be King of all Britain, and they decided to fight him. Merlin intervened and told them that Arthur was Uther's son, but not all of them listened to him or cared. Many of them still fought against Arthur. Merlin stayed by Arthur's side as a counselor through his battles to claim his kingship. Merlin helped him strategize as a battle commander. Then, when it was time, Merlin rode up on a black horse and told Arthur that the war was over.

## Merlin and Magic

Of course, Merlin was a magician, and the Arthur story includes many instances of magic.

- Arthur lost his sword in his fight with a knight, Sir Pellinore, so Merlin took him to a lake, "a fair water and broad, and in the midst of the lake Arthur was ware of an arm clothed in white samite, that held a fair sword in that hand." Arthur wanted the sword for himself. A lady walked towards them, the "Lady of the Lake," and she spoke with Arthur about the sword. The Lady of the Lake allowed Arthur and Merlin to row out to the rock where the arm was holding the sword. Arthur took the sword and its scabbard. This sword was the magical Excalibur—Arthur could never be defeated in battle as long as he wielded it. The scabbard was magical too and as long as Arthur wore the scabbard he could not be wounded or killed.

---

***Harry Potter Connection!*** The story of Arthur retrieving Excalibur from the lake is reminiscent of the way Harry retrieved Godric Gryffindor's sword in The Deathly Hallows. Harry was drawn to the water by a "sorcerer" (Snape's patronus) and then had to fetch the sword from the water. Arthur had a much easier time than Harry, but it was still a magical sword in a body of water.

---

- Merlin magically produced food for the soldier's feasts.
- Merlin could control the weather—he called up storms and wind and darkness to help Arthur and his knights.
- He traveled to another land to get more troops so quickly that it had to have been done magically. Merlin amassed ten thousand soldiers for Arthur and hid them in the forest!
- Merlin was often seen in the stories in disguise. In one part of the story Merlin appeared before Arthur as a 14 year old boy who told Arthur that his father was Uther Pendragon. Arthur didn't believe him because he was so young. The young boy went away and an old man appeared. He told Arthur the same thing and then admitted that he was Merlin. Arthur believed him.
- Merlin could appear and disappear at will. In the stories he often just "appeared" before Arthur.
- Merlin had the gift of prophecy and often made prophecies about Arthur and his knights. He told Arthur that he would be killed by his son/nephew Mordred. He warned Arthur that he'd lose his scabbard to a woman he trusted (it was Morgan le Fay). Merlin also warned Arthur about his wife Guinevere; that she was in love with Lancelot and he with her. Unfortunately for everyone involved, Arthur did not heed the warning. The relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere destroyed the Knights of the Round Table. You'd think Arthur would have known to believe Merlin!

### **Merlin's Death**

Finally, Merlin fell in love with a Lady of the Lake, Nimue. Merlin became so besotted with her that he followed her around and never wanted to be away from her. She treated him well and learned all his magic from him. Merlin and Nimue took their leave of Arthur's court and traveled

around, and they eventually ended up in Cornwall in southwest England. Merlin showed Nimue an enchanted rock that lay under a great stone that held strong magic. She conspired for him to go into the rock. He did so and with her enchantments she trapped him there for all eternity. There was no magic that he could do to get himself out of that rock. That was the end of Merlin.

### **Morgan le Fay**

Morgan le Fay was an important part of the King Arthur stories as well. In *Le Morte d'Arthur* Morgan was the third daughter of Igraine and Gorlois. When Uther married Igraine, he put Morgan in a nunnery, "and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy." She was then married off to King Uriens of Scotland, one of Uther's allies, and she remained his wife until he died. Morgan was considered a great sorceress. Even her name indicated what she was—Fay means “fairy”.

Morgan's character, although certainly bad in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, got worse as more stories were told of King Arthur. Here are a few examples of how her character changed for the worse:

- In *Le Morte d'Arthur* it was not Morgan who was the mother of Mordred, but her sister Morgawse. Morgawse and Arthur did not know each other when they slept together. In later stories Morgan became the mother of Mordred. Not only that, but she knew Arthur was her brother and she seduced him!
- In later stories Morgan (being Mordred's mother) urged him to hate and fight against King Arthur. In the earlier *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Mordred is one of Arthur's knights and betrays him all on his own.

- In the later stories, Morgan was the enchantress who trapped Merlin in the rock (in some stories it is a tree), and not Nimue.
- In one later story it was Morgan who told Arthur that his queen Guinevere cheated on him with Lancelot. In that story Morgan, unhappy and unfaithful in her own marriage, became a lady-in-waiting to Queen Guinevere. Guinevere was not happy about Morgan's affair with one of Arthur's knights and so banished Morgan from court. To get back at Guinevere she exposed Guinevere's infidelity with Lancelot.

### **Morgan and Arthur and Excalibur**

The main story of Morgan is about her enchanting Arthur, stealing Excalibur, the scabbard, and trying to have Arthur killed.

Arthur traveled to an island on which Morgan had put an enchantment, although he did not know that it was enchanted or that she was the enchantress. There were twenty other knights there as well, and all of them, including Arthur, were held prisoner. She tricked Arthur onto the island to get a hold of Excalibur. With Arthur imprisoned, Morgan had the sword and scabbard taken away, and she made a perfect copy of them. Arthur was told he could escape the island prison and free the other knights, by jousting and fighting another knight. He agreed, and was given back his sword and scabbard (which were actually the copies).

Arthur fought this knight, Accolon, who had Excalibur and the magic scabbard. Accolon fought Arthur because he loved Morgan and wanted to marry her. He had no idea he was fighting King Arthur. They fought a long and bloody battle. Unfortunately for Arthur, he was seriously wounded, because he didn't have his magic sword and scabbard.

At the moment when Arthur was about to succumb to Accolon, Nimue (a Lady of the Lake) came by. She recognized Arthur, saw his peril, and enchanted Excalibur to fly into his hands. Arthur immediately recognized his real sword, picked it up, and mortally wounded Accolon.

After the fight Arthur stayed at a monastery to rest, and Morgan once again tried to steal Excalibur and the scabbard. She snuck into his room while he was asleep and tried to take them. Arthur had his hand too firmly on Excalibur, so she only took the scabbard. When Arthur woke up he discovered what had happened and chased after Morgan. Morgan came to a deep lake, and determined to keep the scabbard from Arthur, she threw it far into the lake. It sank and disappeared forever. Arthur and his men were still after her so she turned herself and her horse into large stones to hide. They did not discover her.

In the end Arthur forgave Morgan. When he was mortally wounded on the battlefield fighting Mordred (just as Merlin predicted) she was one of the three sorceresses who carried his body to its final resting place on the magical island of Avalon.

### **Beowulf**

The epic poem *Beowulf* was written in the 10th century, but was taken from a much earlier oral storytelling tradition. It is considered the first work of English literature, since it was written in Old English and not in Latin. In this epic poem we see many creatures and situations that will feature in later English stories right up to Harry Potter. In *Beowulf* we have:

- A brave young man who fights and kills a monster that terrorizes people.

- A hero who must fight underwater.
- A dragon guarding an underground treasure and a hero attempting to steal that treasure.
- A young man who steals a cup from the treasure.

In the tale of *Beowulf*, Beowulf was a young accomplished warrior who fought several monsters. First, there was the great monster, Grendel, who was attacking and killing people in Denmark. Although the king of Denmark, Hrothgar, had sent out his own warriors to kill Grendel, no one could succeed. Beowulf, being young and brave and eager to prove his worth, traveled to Denmark to kill Grendel. King Hrothgar accepted Beowulf's offer and had a banquet in his honor.

When Grendel arrived at Hrothgar's hall to kill more Danes, Beowulf fought him *with his bare hands*. They struggled and eventually Beowulf won, tearing off Grendel's arm. Grendel slunk off to his home in a swamp to die.

---

***Mythology Connection!*** The Greek mythology hero Hercules kills monsters with his bare hands.

---



---

***Harry Potter Connection!*** Harry fights a monster in *The Chamber of Secrets*, the basilisk. Like Grendel killing Hrothgar's men in his great hall, the basilisk is killing (or trying to kill) students at Hogwarts. Although Harry does not fight the basilisk with his bare hands, he does go down into the chamber of secrets with very little to fight with.

---

---

***Harry Potter Connection!*** Like Beowulf, Harry fights monsters underwater during the second task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He magically stays underwater for longer than is humanly possible (although not all day), and he has to fight off underwater creatures, like grindylows, to get to his objective. Beowulf also had to fight off underwater creatures, “...swarming through the water, throngs of sea-beasts threw themselves upon him...” (Beowulf, 98).

---

Grendel's mother (whose name we never learn; she is just “Grendel's mother”) wanted revenge for her son's death. She killed one of King Hrothgar's advisers and then returned to her swamp. Beowulf and a company of men went to the swamp to fight Grendel's mother. Beowulf dove into the swamp and it took him *all day* to swim to the bottom!

Beowulf used a magic sword to kill Grendel's mother, found Grendel's body, cut off its head, and then returned to King Hrothgar in triumph.

---

***Harry Potter Connection!*** Harry and Beowulf are both gifted with a magical sword at just the right moment to kill the monster. Beowulf found a “giant-sword” which was the “*wonder of its kind was yet so enormous that no other man would be equal to bearing it in battle-play*” (Beowulf, 100). Harry is given the Sword of Griffindor to kill the basilisk right when things look bleak. He's begging for help to save him from the basilisk when, “*something very hard and heavy thudded onto the top of Harry's head...a gleaming silver sword had appeared inside the hat...*” (COS, 319-320). Both kill the monster and save their people.

---

Beowulf returned home to Geatland (Ee-ate-land), was treated as a hero, and eventually became king. He ruled well for 50 years.

When Beowulf was old and gray one of his people, a slave of one of the warriors, found his way into a barrow, and came across a huge stash of treasure—he later found out that it was the treasure of a race of men long since dead and forgotten. A dragon guarded the treasure, but it slept, so the slave stole a goblet.

---

***Harry Potter Connection!*** Harry, Hermione, and Ron steal a goblet (Helga Hufflepuff's cup) from an underground cavern guarded by a dragon! They also unleash the dragon, although they do it on purpose, and the dragon does not go on to destroy the nearby villages.

---

The dragon awoke and discovered that someone had intruded into his lair and stolen the goblet. He left the underground lair and started wreaking havoc on the land. He breathed fire and burned down the villagers' houses and buildings, killing many people. At the end of the night, he returned to his barrow.

---

***Sound Familiar?*** The story of a dragon (or monster) terrorizing and killing people is very common. It appears with the Greek mythology story of Perseus. He saved Andromeda from being a sacrifice to save her city from a sea monster. We see it with the story of Saint George and the dragon. And we see it with Harry and the basilisk. The basilisk is roaming Hogwarts castle and attacking students. Eventually one of the students (Ginny) becomes a "sacrifice" to the monster and our hero (Harry of course) has to kill the monster and save the girl and town (Hogwarts).

---

Beowulf believed that somehow he had angered the "gods" and this dragon attack was their way of punishing him. Even his own house and wealth had been burned by the dragon. He proposed to fight the dragon and had his men make him a shield made from iron. At the time the men had shields made from wood, but Beowulf knew that wood could not withstand the dragon's fire. Beowulf also realized that he was old and would die soon so he wanted to do one last brave deed and save his people from the dragon.

Beowulf and some of his warriors went off to fight the dragon. The dragon came out from under the barrow and attacked them. Beowulf was hurt, which scared his men and they ran away. They watched Beowulf from afar, but one brave warrior, Wiglaf, went back to help their leader. Wiglaf remembered all the good things that Beowulf had

done for him as a lord and king. Beowulf stabbed the dragon a couple of times with his sword but it didn't do anything. He started to lose hope. Then the dragon bit Beowulf and had him in his jaws. Wiglaf stabbed the dragon in his underbelly and he let go of Beowulf and began to die. Beowulf then beheaded it.

Beowulf was now dying (from the dragon's poison as well as from the wounds), but he asked Wiglaf to go down and retrieve the treasures from the dragon's hoard. Wiglaf did as Beowulf asked and brought as much as treasure as he could carry back up. Beowulf died.

Unfortunately for Beowulf, he had no Fawkes the Phoenix with his magically restorative tears to save him!

The cowardly warriors came back, Wiglaf chastised them for their cowardice, and then he sent a messenger to tell all the Geats that their king was dead. He proclaimed how bravely Beowulf fought against the dragon. Beowulf was cremated on a funeral pyre and placed in a burial mound with much of the dragon's treasure.