**Marilyn Stokstad INTRODUCES *from Perceval, “The Grail” by Chrétien de Troyes***

**The Medieval Castle: Picturing the Encounter**

In Chrétien de Troyes’s poem Perceval, the hero, Perceval, encounters the Holy Grail in a mysterious castle. To picture this episode in his quest, it helps to know something about medieval castles. The information that follows each of these four quotations from the poem will help you picture what Perceval sees.

**“He caught sight / of a tower starting to appear . . .”**

That Perceval should find a castle slowly becoming visible, as if it were emerging out of the mist, is not surprising. The last time I visited Windsor Castle in England, I felt like Perceval. The fog was thick, and I could see only ghostly towers. Perceval sees a tower across the river, then more towers, and finally the Great Hall.

Medieval castles usually stood on hills or beside rivers. Where there was no river, deep ditches (moats) and high walls reinforced with towers surrounded courtyards and buildings. The walls and towers were crenellated, or notched, to form protective shields for men standing on top. A Great Tower served as the final refuge for the residents in wartime. The lord’s hall and residence was a separate building.

**“The youth went toward the gate and found / the drawbridge lowered . . .”**

Perceval enters the Grail Castle by crossing a drawbridge and passing through a gate into the castle yard. Castle gates were always heavily fortified. A pair of towers flanked the entrance, which consisted of a massive wooden door reinforced with metal. A sliding wood and metal grill (the portcullis) could be dropped in front of the door. When the drawbridge was raised, it also added to the strength of the door as well as the water defense. By the time a visitor, like Perceval, had passed these outer defenses, he would have been impressed, if not intimidated. Of course, that was the point. The castle symbolized the authority and military power of its lord.

**“two squires escort him to the hall . . .”**

A medieval castle was not a single building. It was like a village with the lord's residence and hall, chapel, guardrooms, kitchen, dormitories, barns, craft shops, storehouses, and gardens. The most important building was the Great Hall.

In the Middle Ages, life revolved around the hall. The room served as a banquet hall, audience chamber, and courtroom, and at night servants, travelers, and even guests might sleep there. Furniture was simple: chests served as both seats and storage places, and trestle tables were stacked by the walls and assembled at meal times. In a wealthy household, gold and silver vessels and platters might be displayed on special ornate cupboards. Textiles provided color and luxury.

***“a squire came, clasping / a lance of purest white . . .”***

As Perceval and the lord sit talking, a mysterious procession enters the hall. Young men carry a bleeding lance and two candelabra. Maidens bear a glowing, golden chalice and a silver platter. The procession itself is not surprising, since servants normally carried in the food in a procession. Food had to be brought into the hall from the kitchen beyond the screened passage at the far end of the hall.

But the lance and grail procession, which passes by the table and enters an inner room at the beginning and before every course in the banquet, is a strange form of this familiar ritual. To see what it might mean, join Perceval on his quest.

**Thinking About the Commentary**

**1.  (a)** **Recall:**What did a castle look like from the outside? **(b)** **Connect:**In what ways did its position in the landscape and the details of its appearance relate to its main purpose of protection?

**2.  (a)** **Recall:**How did a medieval castle resemble a village? **(b)** **Infer:**Why is it logical that Perceval’s encounter with the grail occurs in the hall?

**As You Read from Perceval, “The Grail” . . .**

**3.** Use what you have learned about medieval castles to picture the action and descriptions in as much detail as possible.

**4.** Consider how the setting relates to the poem’s theme.

Chrétien de Troyes

**(1135–1180)**

Chrétien de Troyes was one of the first and most gifted authors of Arthurian romances. Details about his life are lost to time, but his name provides the clue that he probably came from the town of Troyes, located in the heart of the Champagne region of France. The name *Chrétien,* which means Christian, may simply be an indication of his religion.

**An Educated Courtier**

Most of what scholars know about Chrétien’s life is based on an analysis of his work. Clearly, he was well educated. His work reflects knowledge of Latin as well as the cultures of Provence, a region in southern France, and Bretagne (Brittany), a region in northwest France. He wrote in the vernacular—the language of common people—and was inspired by a French translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae,* which introduced the British legends of King Arthur to continental Europe.

**The Grail Tale**

Chrétien’s *Perceval* is the earliest known version of the Grail legend, which describes the quest for the Holy Grail, the cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper. According to medieval legend, both this cup and the lance that pierced Jesus’ side during the Crucifixion were hidden in a magical castle. Sometime in the late Middle Ages, the Grail legend was woven into the tales of King Arthur and his knights. The knights sought to find this mystical object, which would then enable Arthur to found a new holy kingdom. Only a knight of absolute purity would be able to find the Grail. In *Perceval,* Chrétien created a knight virtuous enough to see the Grail but not quite pure enough to obtain it. Chrétien died before completing this story; nevertheless, it remains one of the most enduring tales to emerge from the Middle Ages.

 



**Background**

Perceval is a young man whose mother raised him in isolation after losing her husband and two other sons to chivalric combat. One day, Perceval meets a group of knights, who so impress him that he decides to become a knight himself. He journeys to King Arthur’s court, proves his valor, and is accepted. As part of his training for knighthood, Perceval learns never to ask questions and never to speak until spoken to first. Once his training is complete, Perceval sets out on a quest for the Grail, or holy cup. This excerpt begins just before Perceval stumbles upon a mysterious castle, that of the ailing Fisher King.



 The youth began his journey from

 the castle, and the daytime whole

 he did not meet one living soul:

 no creature from the wide earth’s span,

5no Christian woman, Christian man

 who could direct him on his way.

 The young man did not cease to pray

 the **sovereign** father, God, Our Lord,

 if He were willing, to accord

10that he would find his mother still

 alive and well. He reached a hill

 and saw a river at its base.

 So rapid was the current’s pace,

 so deep the water, that he dared

15not enter it, and he declared,

 “Oh God Almighty! It would seem,

 if I could get across this stream,

 I’d find my mother, if she’s living.”

 He rode the bank with some misgiving



20and reached a cliff, but at that place

 the water met the cliff’s sheer face

 and kept the youth from going through.

 A little boat came into view;

 it headed down the river, floating

25and carrying two men out boating.

 The young knight halted there and waited.

 He watched the way they **navigated**

 and thought that they would pass the place

 he waited by the cliff’s sheer face.

30They stayed in mid-stream, where they stopped

 and took the anchor, which they dropped.

 The man afore,**1**a fisher, took

 a fish to bait his line and hook;

 in size the little fish he chose

35was larger than a minnow grows.

 The knight, completely at a loss,

 not knowing how to get across,

 first greeted them, then asked the pair,

 “Please, gentlemen, nearby is there



40a bridge to reach the other side?”

 To which the fisherman replied,

 “No, brother, for besides this boat,

 the one in which we are afloat,

 which can’t bear five men’s weight as charge,

45there is no other boat as large

 for twenty miles each way and more,

 and you can’t cross on horseback, for

 there is no ferry, bridge, nor ford.”

 “Tell me,” he answered, “by Our Lord,



50where I may find a place to stay.”

 The fisherman said, “I should say

 you’ll need a roof tonight and more,

 so I will lodge you at my door.

 First find the place this rock is breached

55and ride uphill, until you’ve reached

 the summit of the cliff,” he said.

 “Between the wood and river bed

 you’ll see, down in the valley wide,

 the manor house where I reside.”

60The knight rode up the cliff until

 he reached the summit of the hill.

 He looked around him from that stand

 but saw no more than sky and land.

 He cried, “What have I come to see?

65Stupidity and trickery!

 May God dishonor and disgrace

 the man who sent me to this place!

 He had the long way round in mind,



 when he told me that I would find

70a manor when I reached the peak.

 Oh, fisherman, why did you speak?

 For if you said it out of spite,

 you tricked me badly!” He caught sight

 of a tower starting to appear

75down in a valley he was near,

 and as the tower came into view,

 if people were to search, he knew,

 as far as Beirut,**2**they would not

 find any finer tower or spot.



80The tower was dark gray stone, and square,

 and flanked by lesser towers, a pair.

 Before the tower the hall was laid;

 before the hall was the arcade.**3**

 On toward the tower the young man rode

85in haste and called the man who showed

 the way to him a worthy guide.

 No longer saying he had lied,

 he praised the fisherman, **elated**

 to find his lodgings as he stated.

90The youth went toward the gate and found

 the drawbridge lowered to the ground.

 He rode across the drawbridge span.

 Four squires awaited the young man.

 Two squires came up to help him doff

95his arms and took his armor off.

 The third squire led his horse away

 to give him fodder, oats, and hay.

 The fourth brought a silk cloak, new-made,

 and led him to the hall’s arcade,

100which was so fine, you may be sure

 you’d not find, even if you were

 to search as far as Limoges,**4**one

 as splendid in comparison.

 The young man paused in the arcade,



105until the castle’s master made

 two squires escort him to the hall.

 The young man entered with them all

 and found the hall was square inside:

 it was as long as it was wide;

110and in the center of its span

 he saw a handsome nobleman

 with grayed hair, sitting on a bed.



 The nobleman wore on his head

 a mulberry-black sable cap

115and wore a dark silk robe and wrap.

 He leaned back in his weakened state

 and let his elbow take his weight.

 Between four columns, burning bright,

 a fire of dry logs cast its light.



120In order to enjoy its heat,

 four hundred men could find a seat

 around the outsized fire, and not

 one man would take a chilly spot.

 The solid fireplace columns could

125support the massive chimney hood,

 which was of bronze, built high and wide.

 The squires, one squire on either side,

 appeared before their lord foremost

 and brought the youth before his host.

130He saw the young man, whom he greeted.

 “My friend,” the nobleman entreated,

 “don’t think me rude not to arise;

 I hope that you will realize

 that I cannot do so with ease.”

135“Don’t even mention it, sir, please,

 I do not mind,” replied the boy,

 “may Heaven give me health and joy.”

 The lord rose higher on the bed,

 as best he could, with pain, and said,

140“My friend, come nearer, do not be

 embarrassed or disturbed by me,

 for I command you to come near.

 Come to my side and sit down here.”

 The nobleman began to say,

145“From where, sir, did you come today?”

 He said, “This morning, sir, I came

 from Belrepeire, for that’s its name.”

 “So help me God,” the lord replied,

 “you must have had a long day’s ride:

150to start before the light of morn

 before the watchman blew his horn.”

 “Sir, I assure you, by that time

 the morning bells had rung for prime,”**5**

 the young man made the observation.

155While they were still in conversation,

 a squire entered through the door

 and carried in a sword he wore

 hung from his neck and which thereto



 he gave the rich man, who withdrew

160the sword halfway and checked the blade

 to see where it was forged and made,

 which had been written on the sword.

 The blade was wrought, observed the lord,

 of such fine steel, it would not break

165save with its bearer’s life at stake

 on one occasion, one alone,

 a peril that was only known

 to him who forged and tempered it.

 The squire said, “Sir, if you permit,

170your lovely blonde niece sent this gift,

 and you will never see or lift

 a sword that’s lighter for its strength,

 considering its breadth and length.

 Please give the sword to whom you choose,

175but if it goes to one who’ll use

 the sword that he is given well,

 you’ll greatly please the demoiselle.

 The forger of the sword you see

 has never made more swords than three,

180and he is going to die before

 he ever forges any more.

 No sword will be quite like this sword.”

 Immediately the noble lord

 bestowed it on the newcomer,

185who realized that its hangings were

 a treasure and of worth untold.

 The pommel**6**of the sword was gold,

 the best Arabian or Grecian;

 the sheath’s embroidery gold Venetian.

190Upon the youth the castle’s lord

 bestowed the richly mounted sword

 and said to him, “This sword, dear brother,

 was destined for you and none other.

 I wish it to be yours henceforth.

195Gird on the sword and draw it forth.”

 He thanked the lord, and then the knight

 made sure the belt was not too tight,

 and girded on the sword, and took

 the bare blade out for a brief look.

200Then in the sheath it was replaced:

 it looked well hanging at his waist

 and even better in his fist.

 It seemed as if it would assist



 the youth in any time of need

205to do a brave and knightly deed.

 Beside the brightly burning fire

 the youth turned round and saw a squire,

 who had his armor in his care,

 among the squires standing there.

210He told this squire to hold the sword

 and took his seat beside the lord,

 who honored him as best he might.

 The candles cast as bright a light

 as could be found in any manor.

215They chatted in a casual manner.

 Out of a room a squire came, clasping

 a lance of purest white: while grasping

 the center of the lance, the squire

 walked through the hall between the fire

220and two men sitting on the bed.

 All saw him bear, with measured tread,

 the pure white lance. From its white tip

 a drop of crimson blood would drip

 and run along the white shaft and

225drip down upon the squire’s hand,

 and then another drop would flow.

 The knight who came not long ago

 beheld this marvel, but preferred

 not to inquire why it occurred,

230for he recalled the admonition

 the lord made part of his tuition,**7**

 since he had taken pains to stress

 the dangers of loquaciousness.**8**

 The young man thought his questions might

235make people think him impolite,

 and that’s why he did not inquire.

 Two more squires entered, and each squire

 held candelabra, wrought of fine

 pure gold with niello work design.**9**

240The squires with candelabra fair

 were an extremely handsome pair.

 At least ten lighted candles blazed

 in every holder that they raised.

 The squires were followed by a maiden

245who bore a grail, with both hands laden.

 The bearer was of noble mien,**10**

 well dressed, and lovely, and **serene**

 and when she entered with the grail,

 the candles suddenly grew pale,



250the grail cast such a brilliant light,

 as stars grow dimmer in the night

 when sun or moonrise makes them fade.

 A maiden after her conveyed

 a silver platter past the bed.

255The grail, which had been borne ahead,

 was made of purest, finest gold

 and set with gems; a manifold

 display of jewels of every kind,

 the costliest that one could find



260in any place on land or sea,

 the rarest jewels there could be,

 let not the slightest doubt be cast.

 The jewels in the grail surpassed

 all other gems in radiance.

265They went the same way as the lance:

 they passed before the lord’s bedside

 to another room and went inside.

 The young man saw the maids’ procession

 and did not dare to ask a question



270about the grail or whom they served;

 the wise lord’s warning he observed,

 for he had taken it to heart.

 I fear he was not very smart;

 I have heard warnings people give:

275that one can be too talkative,

 but also one can be too still.

 But whether it was good or ill,

 I do not know, he did not ask.

 The squires who were assigned the task



280of bringing in the water and

 the cloths obeyed the lord’s command.

 The men who usually were assigned

 performed these tasks before they dined.

 They washed their hands in water, warmed,

285and then two squires, so I’m informed,

 brought in the ivory tabletop,

 made of one piece: they had to stop

 and hold it for a while before



 the lord and youth, until two more

290squires entered, each one with a trestle.**11**

 The trestles had two very special,

 rare properties, which they contained

 since they were built, and which remained

 in them forever: they were wrought

295of ebony, a wood that’s thought

 to have two virtues: it will not

 ignite and burn and will not rot;

 these dangers cause no harm nor loss.

 They laid the tabletop across

300the trestles, and the cloth above.

 What shall I say? To tell you of

 the cloth is far beyond my scope.

 No legate, cardinal, or pope

 has eaten from a whiter one.

305The first course was of venison,

 a peppered haunch, cooked in its fat,

 accompanied by a clear wine that

 was served in golden cups, a pleasant,

 delicious drink. While they were present

310a squire carved up the venison.

 He set the peppered haunch upon

 a silver platter, carved the meat,

 and served the slices they would eat

 by placing them on hunks of bread.

 Again the grail passed by the bed,



315and still the youth remained reserved

 about the grail and whom they served.

 he did not ask, because he had

 been told so kindly it was bad

320to talk too much, and he had taken

 these words to heart. He was mistaken;

 though he remembered, he was still

 much longer than was suitable.

 At every course, and in plain sight,

325the grail was carried past the knight,

 who did not ask whom they were serving,

 although he wished to know, observing

 in silence that he ought to learn

 about it prior to his return.

330So he would ask: before he spoke

 he’d wait until the morning broke,

 and he would ask a squire to tell,

 once he had told the lord farewell

 and all the others in his train.

335He put the matter off again

 and turned his thoughts toward drink and food.

 They brought, and in no stingy mood,

 the foods and different types of wine,

 which were delicious, rich and fine.

340The squires were able to provide

 the lord and young knight at his side

 with every course a count, king, queen,

 and emperor eat by routine.

 At dinner’s end, the two men stayed

345awake and talked, while squires made

 the beds and brought them fruit: they ate

 the rarest fruits: the nutmeg, date,

 fig, clove, and pomegranate red.

 With Alexandrian gingerbread,

350electuaries**12**at the end,

 restoratives, a tonic blend,

 and pliris archonticum

 for settling his stomachum.

 Then various liqueurs were poured

355for them to sample afterward:

 straight piment, which did not contain

 sweet honey or a single grain

 of pepper, wine of mulberries,

 clear syrups, other delicacies.

360The youth’s astonishment persisted;

 he did not know such things existed.

 “Now, my dear friend,” the great lord said,

 “the time has come to go to bed.

 I’ll seek my room—don’t think it queer—

365and you will have your bed out here

 and may lie down at any hour.

 I do not have the slightest power

 over my body anymore

 and must be carried to my door.”

370Four **nimble** servants, strongly set,

 came in and seized the coverlet

 by its four corners (it was spread

 beneath the lord, who lay in bed)

 and carried him away to rest.

375The others helped the youthful guest.

 As he required, and when he chose,

 they took his clothing off, and hose,



 and put him in a bed with white,

 smooth linen sheets; he slept all night



380at peace until the morning broke.

 But when the youthful knight awoke,

 he was the last to rise and found

 that there was no one else around.

 Exasperated and alone,

385he had to get up on his own.

 He made the best of it, arose,

 and awkwardly drew on his hose

 without a bit of help or aid.

 He saw his armor had been laid

390at night against the dais’ head

 a little distance from his bed.

 When he had armed himself at last,

 he walked around the great hall past

 the rooms and knocked at every door



395which opened wide the night before,

 but it was useless: juxtaposed,**13**

 the doors were tightly locked and closed.

 He shouted, called, and knocked outside,

 but no one opened or replied.

400At last the young man ceased to call,

 walked to the doorway of the hall,

 which opened up, and passed through there,

 and went on down the castle stair.

 His horse was saddled in advance.

405The young man saw his shield and lance

 were leaned against the castle wall

 upon the side that faced the hall.

 He mounted, searched the castle whole,

 but did not find one living soul,

410one servant, or one squire around.

 He hurried toward the gate and found

 the men had let the drawbridge down,

 so that the knight could leave the town

 at any hour he wished to go.

415His hosts had dropped the drawbridge so

 the youth could cross it undeterred.

 The squires were sent, the youth inferred,

 out to the wood, where they were set

 to checking every trap and net.

420The drawbridge lay across the stream.

 He would not wait and formed a scheme

 of searching through the woods as well

 to see if anyone could tell

 about the lance, why it was bleeding,

425about the grail, whom they were feeding,

 and where they carried it in state.

 The youth rode through the castle gate

 and out upon the drawbridge plank.

 Before he reached the other bank,

430the young man started realizing

 the forefeet of his horse were rising.

 His horse made one great leap indeed.

 Had he not jumped well, man and steed

 would have been hurt. His rider swerved

435to see what happened and observed

 the drawbridge had been lifted high.

 He shouted, hearing no reply,

 “Whoever raised the bridge,” said he,

 “where are you? Come and talk to me!

440Say something to me; come in view.

 There’s something I would ask of you,

 some things I wanted to inquire,

 some information I desire.”

 His words were wasted, vain and fond;

445no one was willing to respond.

**Critical Reading**

**1. Respond:**Which aspect of Perceval’s adventure do you find most interesting? Explain.

**2. (a) Recall:**What invitation does the fisherman extend to Perceval?**(b)Analyze:**Do you think the fisherman and the Fisher King are the same person? Explain.

**3. (a) Recall:**What is the Fisher King’s physical condition?**(b) Analyze:**What do you think might be causing his condition? Support your answer.

**4. (a) Interpret:**When Perceval sees the lance and the Grail, what fateful decision does he make?**(b) Analyze Causes and Effects:**Why do you think he makes this decision?

**5. (a) Speculate:**In what ways, if any, do you think Perceval will grow as a result of this adventure?**(b) Support:**Which details in the excerpt support your position? Explain.

**6. Evaluate:**What do you think the story of Perceval suggests about the pros and cons of innocence? Explain.

**Quick Review**

An **archetype** is a detail, plot pattern, character type, or theme that recurs in the literature of many different cultures. The **quest,** a common archetype, is the danger-filled pursuit of someone or something of great importance. **Disguised identity** is an archetypal plot pattern in which a character’s true identity is concealed by outward appearances.

A **symbol** is a person, place, animal, or object that has its own meaning but also suggests a larger meaning.

To **interpret symbols** as you read, examine the details surrounding important characters, places, objects, or events, and consider their deeper meaning.

Literary Analysis

**Archetypes**

**1.**Use a chart like the one shown to examine the ways in which the story of Perceval exemplifies the **archetype** of the **quest.**



**2. (a)**(a) In “The Lay of the Werewolf,” in what ways is the archetype of **disguised identity** present in a physical sense?**(b)**(b) How is it present in an emotional sense?

Comparing Literary Works

**3. (a)**(a) In *Perceval,* which object serves as the story’s main **symbol** ? Explain.**(b)**(b) In The Lay of the Werewolf, which character serves as the central symbol? Explain.

**4. (a)**(a) Which characters in each story fail to understand the meaning of the main symbol? Explain.**(b)**(b) How does this lack of understanding affect their actions?

Reading Strategy

**Interpreting Symbols**

**5.**Jesus has been referred to as a fisher of men. Does this information affect your **interpretation** of the Fisher King as a symbol?

**6. (a)**(a) Near the end of the story, what advice does the counselor give the king regarding Bisclavaret’s clothing?**(b)**(b) In what ways does his advice add to your understanding of the werewolf as a symbol?

Extend Understanding

**7. Cultural Connection:** What object or idea might be called the “holy grail” of contemporary American culture? Explain.