

Symbol Analysis: The White Stag



Wherever deer roam in the world, the male deer or **stag** is taken for the symbol of sovereignty and virile male strength. There are a number of appearances of stags in stories throughout Celtic mythology and folklore. The stag's antlers were seen as symbolizing the spreading branches of the wood.

In European folklore and heraldry, the **white hart** is a magical white stag whose appearance signifies the beginning of extraordinary adventures. White harts draw adventurers deep into the forest where lie the margins of the Otherworld. In the Arthurian legends, the white hart or white stag is a mystical beast pursued by the Knights of the Round Table.

The first thing to examine is the color: white is a symbol of purity, while also a symbol of otherworldliness. It also appears as an impetus to quest--the white stag or hart often appears in the forests around King Arthur's court, sending the knights off on to adventure against gods and fairies. (C. S. Lewis uses this device at both the beginning and end of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* ¹.) The white hart appears in a notable episode of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, signaling the beginning of King Arthur's reign.

The pursuit of creatures that can never be caught is a recurring theme in mythology. King Arthur himself attempts to capture a white stag on more than one occasion, and is always eluded. The white stag is a true faerie-beast, and represents mankind's quest for spiritual knowledge. In his book *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves asks, "How many kings in how many fairy tales have not chased this beast through enchanted forests and been cheated of their quarry?" The white stag keeps the wisdom we seek from us, for we are not ready to know his secrets. By vanishing into the forest (a gateway to other worlds), the white stag reminds us that until we accept the existence of the unseen and unknown, we will not find the answers to our questions. And so the white stag comes to symbolize something new: our renewed spirit of adventure. As we follow him along our life-path, we should consider the quests of the Arthurian knights, and remember that the path we follow is as important as our destination. The things we see along the way are all part of the adventure.

To Christians, the white stag came to symbolize Christ, perhaps in part inspired by the St. Eustace legend, wherein the Roman soldier Eustace is hunting, and happens upon a deer with a cross between his antlers. Eustace converts on the spot, and is put through numerous tragedies, persecutions, etc., including the death of his family, until being miraculously reunited with them. However, it is clear that this pious legend has pagan predecessors.

It is also worth noting that in medieval Christian iconography, the unicorn was a symbol for Christ. There is a close identification between the white stag and the unicorn, and it can be reasoned that the white stag is the equivalent of the unicorn in these northern cultures, which do not record the existence of unicorns.

1. Oddly enough, the White Witch's sleigh is drawn by a white stag, and these are the first things Edmund sees when entering Narnia, while it is a white stag which leads the children back to England. Perhaps this is an example of Lewis's occasional belief in relativism, that even the evil things of this world have some place in God's plan, though we can't see it. The white stag may be pulling the White Witch, but this is what draws Edmund, and then later the elder siblings, into Narnia. Otherwise, it is doubtful that everyone would have ever believed Lucy.

Name _____

Hr. _____

To the people of King Arthur's world, the White Stag is a symbol of various things. Which correlation do you believe to be the best? Why? Use examples from the passage in your answer.

The Albino Stag represents something that is uncatchable but should be pursued nevertheless. What is something in your world that you think is worth striving for, even though it may never be attained? Even though this goal may never be reached, what can be learned from the pursuit of it? Explain.

Think about all the things that the White Hart represents. For which character from Arthurian legend do you think the White Hart would be the best symbol? Explain your answer.

Select *three* words from the passage that you did not previously know. Look them up in the dictionary. Record their definitions below.