One of the strongest trends in modern Arthurian fiction is that of setting the Arthurian story in Britain after the end of Roman rule. This ‘Dark Ages’ setting began to make its appearance in the thirties and forties, largely replaced the ‘High Medieval’ setting derived from medieval romance, and gained rapid popularity in the sixties in particular.\(^1\)

Central to this trend is a novel which has been widely praised for its sympathetic presentation of Arthur the man: Rosemary Sutcliff’s *Sword at Sunset*. Published in 1963, *Sword at Sunset* is an influential work from the period in which representations of a possibly historical King Arthur were most rapidly gaining ground. This article explores the ways in which Sutcliff creates the illusion of historicity for her representation of a legendary figure, where evidence for that figure’s historical existence is extremely limited and unconvincing. Both fictional and non-fictional histories convince through elements of the structure of their narrative which combine to form a sense of verisimilitude, the likelihood of truth.\(^2\) In Sutcliff’s case, she uses descriptions of the natural landscape and natural imagery to create a verisimilitude based on a strong sense of place. This serves a further purpose: authors who choose to present the Arthurian story find themselves severely curtailed in their options by all of the previous renditions of the legend, and Sutcliff uses her nature imagery to control the legendary material and tie her telling more closely to historical fiction. Yet Sutcliff does use legendary elements in her tale, to add resonance to the story and because she believes that they represent archetypal patterns. She presents much of this material in the same way that she presents historical details – at the level of the plot rather than the style of the narrative – so that musings about the relationship between Saxon, Celt and Roman result in a conclusion which celebrates not historical knowledge, but rather a quasi-mystical ‘oneness of all things’. The nature of this oneness cannot be known through analysis of evidence, but can only be glimpsed at through mystical experience. The endpoint of

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\(^1\) As Raymond Thompson has noted, ‘from 1950 to 1964, they appeared at the average rate of a novel every second year; since 1965 the rate has doubled to one every year’. Raymond Thompson, *The Return from Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1985, pp. 35-36.

this supposedly historical presentation becomes a hermetic secret.\(^3\) The text therefore uses history, legend and myth in such a way that the claim to historicity supports a new rendering of the mythic elements.

* * *

Why represent Arthur as an historical figure? The claims for the historical existence of a ‘real’ Arthur are hotly debated. Those who wish to prove the existence of Arthur have two sources of evidence at their disposal: texts and archeological remains. Leslie Alcock uses his archeological work at South Cadbury Hill in Somerset to conclude that Arthur did exist, but his evidence is elliptical, at best.\(^4\) More recent work has cast doubts on South Cadbury as an Arthurian site.\(^5\) As David Dumville has noted, useful insights into fifth and sixth century Britain are put to the service of the quest for the real Arthur even if this means attenuating their wider significance.\(^6\) As for the textual evidence, prior to the ninth century it is non-existent.\(^7\) Gildas never mentions Arthur in his account of the battle of Badon, written in the mid-sixth century, and attempts to place Arthur there nevertheless have been highly speculative.\(^8\) There are references to Arthur in two Welsh poems, the \textit{Gododdin} and \textit{Gereint filius Erbin}, but Thomas Charles-Edwards denies any claims that would date these references before the ninth or tenth century.\(^9\) Much of the weight of proof therefore falls on the \textit{Historia Brittonum}, datable to the early part of the ninth century. Work on this text is continuing, but as evidence for the sixth century it provides no conclusive proof as yet.\(^10\) Dumville expresses his unease

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\(^7\) The status of the stone inscribed with the name ‘Artognou’, recently found at Tintagel, is still undecided. Even English Heritage, which has a vested financial interest in the discovery, is being tentative in drawing conclusions, although the press is not following suit. Chris Court, ‘Name of Legendary King Arthur Found on a Stone’, \textit{The Age}, 10/08/98.


\(^10\) \textit{ibid.}, pp. 16, 29.
most clearly when he says that ‘most of the available written “evidence” is more apparent than real.’ In fact, most of our so-called historical details about Arthur derive from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, which is a twelfth-century source. Although Ashe has argued for the existence of an older, subsequently lost source from which Geoffrey took his details about Arthur, few scholars accept the historicity of Geoffrey’s account. The question of Arthur’s historical existence therefore remains very open.

The story, however, is about the growth and fall of a civilisation, and in this sense the Arthurian legend seems to contain at least the possibility for an historical setting. As well as this, there is the accretion of legendary material from all of the previous versions of the legend, and a mythic level in which the story is believed to stand for much more than the sum of its narrative elements, and contain some kind of key to the human condition. This complexity produces what is termed ‘the tyranny of tradition’, the essence of which is that the author of any modern work of Arthuriana must be aware of the expectations of the audience, or risk having the believability of his or her work shattered. Lacy defines the tyranny of tradition as the heavy weight of accepted details of the legend that hangs over an author’s head and opposes ‘on the one hand, the natural desire to innovate; on the other, the need to tell a story that corresponds at least in major respects to the audience’s understanding of orthodox Arthurian fact.’ The legendary and mythical elements of previous versions, rather than the sparse historical facts, place the author in a straitjacket.

Modern writers have, on the whole, chosen two paths out of their dilemma: either they make their novels works of fantasy, or of historical fiction with a sub-Roman setting. The fantasy choice is one that uses an elsewhere, another time that is not an historical time, but is a vague, undefined past or a fictional place. Fantasy writers largely concentrate on the mythic elements of the story, and magnify their significance. The choice of historical fiction involves using historical and archeological knowledge about sub-Roman Britain, and often only the very earliest versions of the legend. This vastly reduces the amount of material the writer has to deal with, for

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13 Adam Roberts argues that the legends of Arthur have become so predominant because they are mythic and historical at the same time. Adam Roberts, *Silk and Potatoes: Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1998, p. 22.
14 Norris J. Lacy, ‘Arthurian Film and the Tyranny of Tradition,’ *Arthurian Interpretations*, 4, Fall, 1989, p. 76.
although historical material is increasing, it is still sketchy; and by setting the action in
the ‘Dark Ages’ (a period which in these novels can range from the third to the eighth
centuries, although the fifth and sixth centuries are the most common choices), an
author can justify the omission of much more literary material than he or she might
otherwise have been able to do. The many medieval literary versions simply do not
coalesce into one narrative, despite the constant pressure for authors to include
everything.

The choices any Arthurian novelist must make are many and difficult, and
since informed readers can be expected to have several versions of the legend
conditioning their perceptions, any choice must be justifiable both with regard to the
artistic integrity of the work and the weight of tradition. In choosing to produce an
Arthurian work the artist is calling on the associations of the material to add resonance
to the work, and cannot therefore ignore previous renditions. The verisimilitude of the
work involves both its artistic coherence and the way in which it deals with reader
expectations. In order to achieve these aims, Sutcliff has produced a model reader (a
textual feature of the narrative, the audience within the text for the narrator) who is
informed about the manifold features of the legend, and is somewhat sceptical of
attempts to remove or supersede these features. 16 By making this scepticism part of the
model reader, she hopes to harness it in support of the verisimilitude of her text.

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Authors of Arthurian historical fiction, therefore, need to perform a balancing act
between the legendary and historical segments of their material. The key to Sutcliff’s
verisimilitude is her frequent and lengthy descriptions of the natural environment of
her setting, coupled with a notable use of nature metaphors for legendary aspects of the
story. The realism of the novel is grounded in the nature descriptions, so that the
physicality of the setting underpins the historical material. The realism, in a stylistic
sense, acts as the ‘evidence’ for the factuality of the tale’s historicity. Simultaneously,
the physical setting attains certain connotations of its own, which are mythic yet
separate from the mythic qualities of the legendary material: this occurs when natural
landscapes are not only described, but are also characterised as ancient and powerful
and probably not benign. The legendary material is carefully associated with nature
imagery on the level of realism, and this is Sutcliff’s most powerful tool for controlling

16 By outlining such a sceptical model reader, Sutcliff is producing, in Umberto Eco’s words, ‘a
“closed” project’ of her model reader. Umberto Eco, Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics
of model reader and model author, see Lucy Mills, Myth and History: Twentieth-Century
Representations of King Arthur and Robin Hood, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1998,
particularly pp. 25-44.
the introduction of the traditional elements of the story. If the legendary aspects are successfully controlled, then the sense of a greater meaning inherent in the choice of Arthurian material is diverted towards only those aspects which the text has marked as significant.

Any discussion of Sutcliff’s version of the Arthurian matter must begin with realism, since Sutcliff has sought to ground her verisimilitude in a stated realism. In the ‘Author’s Note’ which opens the book, Sutcliff presents her case for the representation of an historical Arthur. She invokes the glory of the legend, before stating her preference for an historicised version that explores the possibility that a Romano-British war leader fought to preserve Roman civilization in Britain against the incursions of the Saxons, by using ‘fragments of known facts … likelihoods and deductions and guess-work pure and simple.’ It is noteworthy that Sutcliff does not claim factual verisimilitude – nowhere does she say that ‘this is the truth’. What she does is oppose the romance tradition to recent explorations by historians and anthropologists (and, she might have added, archeologists), characterising the one as ‘moonshine’ and the other as ‘matter’. While she does not deride the romance tradition, she dismisses it point by point (‘No knight in shining armour, no Round Table, no many-towered Camelot...’). Sutcliff chooses to base her text in a possible reality of historical speculation, rather than in the certain existence of the romance tradition, placing her faith in one type of history: the great man’s story. She is writing fiction, however, not history, so she does not have the option of staying silent where historical record or even conjecture might disappear. The evidence is slim, and a firmer

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18 ‘Just as the saga of Charlemagne and his paladins is the Matter of France, so for fourteen hundred years or so, the Arthurian Legend has been the Matter of Britain...’. Rosemary Sutcliff, Sword at Sunset, Penguin, London, 1963, p. 7.

19 ibid., p. 7.

20 ibid.

21 ibid.

22 As Dumville has pointed out, the figure of Arthur as a great man of history has come to obscure even non-fictional historical enquiries into sub-Roman Britain. Dumville, ‘Sub-Roman Britain’, p. 174.
basis is necessary for the verisimilitude of the story: hence the choice of realism – 'matter not moonshine' – as the mode for the book, providing the simulacrum of reality more ideally introduced by the deployment of historical fact. The 'reality effect' in the book supports the slim historical basis for the tale. As I shall demonstrate, the main way in which this reality effect is achieved is through the use of imagery that is closely related to the natural world. In the final analysis, however, Sutcliff is writing the story because, 'for fourteen hundred years or so, the Arthurian Legend has been the Matter of Britain', necessitating the introduction of some legendary aspects.

Sutcliff lays a groundwork of realism through her description of the physical setting for the story. She renames her King Arthur character ‘Artos’, and introduces him to the reader in Arfon, the countryside where he was brought up:

> Then I turned my back on the valley and climbed on, up into the solitude of the high hills, into a world that was very old and very empty, where sound was the crying of the green plover and the siffling of the little wing through the dun grass, and movement was the cloud shadows racing from hill to hill.

Later in the novel, Artos notes the feeling of the land round Cit Coit Caledon as he waits for battle, on a grey spring day, among the ‘starry white wood anemones [turning] their shivering backs to the wind and the scuds of rain’. This image is very evocative of the landscape and the season, but beyond this the land has a brooding quality:

> always in my mind there is this quality of darkness, of wolfish menace in the land itself. It was as though maybe it were a very old forest and crouched brooding over secrets that it would not be well for men to know.

Because it has been emphasised as a key part of his perception from the beginning, the natural descriptions serve to ground Artos, and hence the whole tale, in the physical

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23 A term derived from Roland Barthes, who argues that incidental details create the effect of realism in a story, that realistic fiction is a narrative form like other kinds of fiction, but creates the illusion of a closer relationship to experienced reality through the use of incidental details irrelevant to the plot. I would argue, from Jakobson, that the form imagery takes in the work is also an essential part of this. Barthes also points out that history has been related to realism and opposed to mere resemblance since antiquity, so the use of history adds another powerful layer to Sutcliff’s realism effect. Roland Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, in Lilian R. Furst (ed.), *Realism*, Longman, London, 1992, pp. 139-140.

24 Sutcliff, p. 7.

25 *ibid.*, p. 31.

realism of the ancient land of Britain. At the same time, the detailed descriptions of the
land move easily into simile: Cit Coit Caledon is like a brooding beast, for instance.
This hints to the reader that the land is the most important presence in the book, since
it is physically real and vibrant with significance.

The physical realism of the material world of buildings and cities is a lesser but
still present part of Sutcliff’s verisimilitude. When Artos visits Avalon, the Isle of
Apples, he says that ‘It is a good place – peace rises in it as the mist over the reed
beds’.\(^{27}\) Later Artos describes the half derelict Basilica at Venta: ‘but the place had a
certain dignity and beauty still, though a beauty of decay and fallen leaves compared
with the pride of high summer.’\(^{28}\) In both cases nature metaphors are included in the
descriptions of the man-made structures to impart the realism most strongly associated
with the natural world. The history of sub-Roman Britain is often pieced together
through physical remains, and Sutcliff expresses her historical veracity through the
description of sites which are already, in the time span of her novel, visibly
deteriorating towards their place amongst the modern objects of archeology. Examples
could be multiplied, except that to do so would be to take them out of their full
context. These descriptions lay a groundwork of realism, but that is not their primary
purpose. In her ‘Author’s Note’, Sutcliff states that

> Certain features I have retained from the traditional Arthurian fabric,
because they have the atmosphere of truth. I have kept the original
framework, or rather two interwrought frameworks: the Sin which
carries with it its own retribution; the Brotherhood broken by the love
between the leader’s woman and his closest friend.\(^{29}\)

If these legendary features are to form part of the verisimilitude of the work as a whole,
they must work with the realism laid down by the descriptions of the natural world.
However these elements, which Sutcliff states are canonical features of the legend,
threaten the author’s own particular verisimilitude by bringing with them a whole series
of connotations for the reader.\(^{30}\) They have a resonance beyond any particular text, a
legendary resonance that does not fit into the standard definition of realism. Sutcliff’s
task is to weave the two parts together so that they lend verisimilitude to each other: we
are to be convinced of the material, historical realism that she presents because it
invokes shades of the legend we already know; we are to accept the supernatural,

\(^{27}\) ibid., p. 51.
\(^{28}\) ibid., pp. 390-1.
\(^{29}\) ibid., p. 7.
\(^{30}\) It is when this fear of other aspects of the tradition becomes most acute that the text closes
archetypal aspects because they are integrated with the material context. To achieve this becomes a delicate balancing act for Sutcliff, as she introduces first one and then the other aspect of the narrative. This is not Sutcliff’s problem alone, but is indicative of a general trend in Arthuriana.31

Sutcliff chooses to include the love triangle of Guenhumara (Guinevere), Artos (Arthur) and Bedwyr (Lancelot) in her narrative.32 This element of the legend necessarily brings with it very strong portents of betrayal and doom, since the adultery traditionally breaks up the Round Table.33 Because the model reader for this novel is an informed reader34 who knows the details of the legend, the inclusion of the Guinevere and Lancelot characters presumes the inclusion of the betrayal of Arthur. In the time of the plot, however, this betrayal has not yet happened. Sutcliff must deal with the fact that her choice of legendary material has given the reader an expectation about what will happen which is not related to the stated events of the story so far.

She uses her natural setting to ground the portents introduced with the legendary material in the underlying realism of the book. Sutcliff begins with a portrayal of the growing relationship between Guenhumara and Artos: when Artos agrees to marry Guenhumara and let her live in camp with him, he is breaking a rule he had set against married women. Cei warns him about this, and raises the spectre of betrayal:

‘Thanks for the warning,’ I said, tranquilly enough, and tried to ignore the black pain of jealousy that stabbed through me. In that moment I first understood that I loved Guenhumara.

In the next I fell headlong over a pig - we kept a good deal of livestock by that time - who rose in squealing affront and lumbered off into the night...

This rude intrusion of animal nature into the heightened realm of legend and portent puts Sutcliff firmly in control of the future of the story once more: she undercuts the legendary connotations of the events by reasserting the bases of her realism.

31 Roberts says, ‘In other words, Sword at Sunset seeks to be both historically authentic and mythically archetypal; there is a contradiction here, but it is the contradiction at the heart of a great many pseudo-realist Arthurian novels’. Roberts, Silk and Potatoes, p. 41.
32 The name Bedwyr is derived from the Welsh tradition, as is Cei: both occur in, for example, Culhwch ac Olwen. John B. Coe and Simon Young (eds), The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend, Llanerch Publishers, Felinfach, 1995, pp. 56-73.
33 For example, the Welsh Triads include ‘Three Faithless Wives of the Island of Britain’, adding ‘And one was more faithless than those three: Gwenthwyfar, Arthur’s wife, since she shamed a better man than any (of the others).’ Trioedd Ynys Prydein, Triad 80, Coe and Young (eds), The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend, p. 87.
34 Eco, Role of the Reader, p. 8.
35 Sutcliff, p. 257.
Yet as the love triangle nears its inevitable outcome, the natural imagery which has hitherto been used to undercut the portents begins to echo them. Guenhumara has been nursing Bedwyr, and they have finally fallen in love – Artos does not know this yet, but feels something is wrong. ‘I thought that a shadow had fallen on Guenhumara, but it was only that the westering sun had slid behind a broken column.’\textsuperscript{36} Nature begins to amplify the portents, but because the groundwork of natural realism has been laid, this reaffirms the verisimilitude of the text, and we see the realistic and legendary aspects of the story inevitably begin to coalesce.

The fact that the whole story is the memory of the dying Artos, is one more element which binds the legendary material to the verisimilitude of the text. Sutcliff plays with the various levels of time that are present in the text – the past of individual memory, the immediacy of the story being told, and the most enduring and common features of the legend we know.\textsuperscript{37} Memory and portent are equally present whenever the reader is invited to reflect upon the possible consequences of actions which have, in the time scheme of the immediate story, just occurred. Such speculation is essential to the enjoyment of the story, but most dangerous in the context of Arthurian tradition. We know what will happen, but we need not doubt the likelihood of Sutcliff’s version of events just because she has no choice about the direction they will take: part of her narrative is reassuring us that she has no choice merely because these things have already happened to her character, Artos. This collusion between memory and portent is highly apparent in the portrayal of the love triangle. Even before Artos meets Guenhumara, he lays down rules for the camp followers, fearing that trouble may start when two men grow jealous over one of the women: ‘That is when the Brotherhood starts to break. Dear God! \textit{That is when the Brotherhood starts to break.}’\textsuperscript{38} That this is a portent for the reader is obvious – but it is expressed through the memory of Artos, and therefore fully in keeping with the verisimilitude of the text. Sutcliff deliberately mixes the tenses in Artos’ description of the first meeting between Guenhumara and Bedwyr:

\begin{quote}
Standing by, it seemed to me that I \textit{was watching} two swordsmen playing for the feel of each other’s blades, but whether the foils were
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36}ibid., p. 451.
\textsuperscript{37}This threefold structure is highly reminiscent of the way in which Paul Ricoeur conceives of the mediation of experience through narrative, which he also sees as a threefold movement through time. The process as it is present in the book as a whole is especially close to Ricoeur’s concept of tradition: ‘Let us understand by this term not the inert transmission of some already dead deposit of material but the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity.’ Paul Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative}, Vol. I, Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (trans.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984 (first French edition 1983), p. 68.
\textsuperscript{38}Sutcliff, pp. 98-9.
blunted or sharp, I could not yet be sure. I have thought since, that they were not sure themselves.\textsuperscript{39}

I have italicised the changes in grammatical tense to emphasise the shifting temporality of the passage, as it moves from action described, to the future speculated upon, to the past remembered. Finally, the text reaches the present time of the opening chapter, and for Artos temporality disappears altogether. He remembers certain things upon waking, but does not know how many times he has woken:

But whether all that was of the first time, or whether other times came into it, I do not know; indeed all time has seemed confused these last few days, so that there is no saying ‘This thing happened after that,’ for all things seem present together, and most things far away...\textsuperscript{40}

This is Sutcliff’s statement of the essential temporal nature of any historical text, fictional or otherwise: all events have happened, and will happen and are happening in the text at once. Such temporality dictates that no one period can ever be free of the awareness of other times. Indeed, this is even truer for non-fiction history, for the writer of fiction can and must introduce imaginary elements whose outcome is not known, but the broad outlines of the story related by non-fiction, academic history is rarely unknown to its audience.

When the climax of the love triangle comes, nature imagery intensifies the outcome. As Artos goes to see his wife’s adultery with his own eyes, he notices a pear tree in a courtyard:

It had been a bird-sown sapling when I first came there; it was dead now, black and stark in the moonlight, its beauty turned skeletal, save for one living branch on which a few white flowers still unfurled their fragile petals in at last reaching out to the spring-time.\textsuperscript{41}

After he has banished the unfaithful Guenhumara and Bedwyr, Artos sees the tree again: ‘In the courtyard a breath of wind tossed the last living branch of the wild pear tree, and scattered a few fragile petals into the dark well water...’.\textsuperscript{42} The tree is obviously symbolic of Artos and the hopes he represents, but it is also a symbol of the way in

\textsuperscript{39} ibid., p. 268.  
\textsuperscript{40} ibid., p. 518.  
\textsuperscript{41} ibid., p. 462.  
\textsuperscript{42} ibid., p. 470.
which the adultery has passed from the realm of legend it inhabited when it was portent, and into the realism of the text.

If Sutcliff is to produce a continuous narrative of events over such an extended period as she describes, she must at some point make suppositions. Such suppositions must be supported by what evidence does exist, just as similar contentions in non-fiction histories must be similarly supported, but it is equally important that they be convincing for the reader. The mechanism through which the text produces verisimilitude is the model reader, a textual feature designed to shape appropriate reactions on the part of empirical readers. Through analysing the ways in which the reactions of the model reader are structured into the text, we can see how the historical verisimilitude of the text is created. In this instance, it is through detailed descriptions of physical settings in the novels: entirely appropriately for a period where the main evidence is archeological. More than man-made structures, however, Sutcliff concentrates on the landscape, with which she closely connects the central character of Artos. The land becomes the defining indication of reality, and firstly undermines then heightens the mythic connotations of the legendary material, recreating the legend in its own image. Hence, the use of history is more a tool to overcome the tyranny of tradition than a search for the truth about Arthur.

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There are two constantly recurring issues in Arthurian criticism dealing with modern works. The first, as explained above, is the idea of the ‘tyranny of tradition’. The second deals with the question of the continuing appeal of the legend. Lacy, who was instrumental in presenting the idea of the tyranny of tradition, relates the idea of this tyranny to the idea of the Arthurian matter as myth, when he observes that ‘Mythopoeia, not only the creation but also the renewal of myth, has from the beginning been a part of Arthurian literature and art.’ Renewals of the legend are inevitable and also ensure its vitality, he contends. How stories of Arthur constitute a myth remains undefined here, although it is implied that longevity is a factor. Caie suggests that the legend ‘has the proportions of major myth.’ Lupack feels that the Arthurian legend bears direct comparison with the Greek myths, since both contain a complex of stories that allow us to explore the human condition in all its forms. Lambides invokes the work done on mythology by Joseph Campbell, and sees the

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43 Eco, ‘Overinterpreting Texts’, p. 64; Eco, Rule of the Reader, p. 7.
44 Alcock, Arthur's Britain, pp. 142-65.
function of mythology as being to initiate the individual into cultural forms that speak to the deeper level of the psyche. The Arthurian myth, she believes, belongs to the timeless realm of symbols, ‘that ineffable region which is the source of myth, renewal, and sustenance.’ Part of the problem stems from the fact that most attempts to define (as opposed to catalogue) the appeal of the legend are somewhat inconclusive.

The notion of a ‘realm of symbols’ correlates with another major explanation for the continuing popularity of the Arthurian stories, that they represent archetypes. Part of the archetypal nature lies in the way in which the Arthurian stories and characters can personify any ideal. However there is also the idea that behind the various literary versions of the legend, and behind the arguments over the possible historicity of Arthur, there is an underlying reality, an essential truth. None of the attempts to define the appeal of the legend are entirely successful, but the concepts of myth and archetype do have their uses as critical tools.

The concept of myth has radically shifting meanings. At its broadest, myths are narratives which cultures take to be essential to their view of the world. These narratives may explain the creation of the world, or the origin of a social practice, or they may be literary archetypes. If the Arthurian stories are myths, they are of the archetypal kind, representing themes so basic to our culture’s understanding of itself that they bear repeating again and again. Another part of their appeal may have to do with the totalising nature of their stories. As Brockway notes, ‘Mythic thinking narrates, integrates, and makes whole; it does not fracture experience into fragments’. The way in which the Arthurian story encompasses the whole life of a person, and the birth, flowering and destruction of a social ideal, means that this story presents a total world view.

The previous section of this paper explored the ways in which an author could produce a narrative from material which ultimately has its basis in legend and literature, and convince readers of its historical reality. This convincing, this verisimilitude, does not lie in the evidence, or the facts, or the history presented. A work of historical fiction does not have scholarly argument, does not take the reader through the weighing of evidence (whatever weighing the author might have done in research for the work), does not possess the scholarly apparatus of footnotes and bibliography which serve to indicate more clearly than anything else that a work is fact, and wants to be read as truth. Verisimilitude lies at the level of language, the style of the text. Ideology has its expression in language, but operates above it, imposing its own meaning on narratives whose overt meaning might at first sight seem to be something quite different. For Stephen Knight, the ‘did Arthur exist’ question is ‘no more or less than a recent ideological redaction of the legend.’ Along with the interest in the ‘historical’ Arthur, the other most cited trend in modern Arthurian literature is the re-introduction of mystical elements, whether this be the Christian mysticism embodied in the quest for the Holy Grail, or an often largely invented neo-pagan mysticism. Sword at Sunset introduces these traces of lost religions and naturalises them by placing them in an invented historical context. The choice of historical fiction for the representation of Arthur is an ideological one, expressing the desire for the provable existence of hero figures. Related to this is the desire, common in medievalism, that the history of the Middle Ages provide us with access to the lost secrets of our culture. The push to historicise Arthur and the neo-pagan trend may seem to be in opposition to each other, but in this novel they support and lend veracity to each other.

In a work of historical fiction there is a level at which events and images are presented to support a particular reading of history. In Sutcliff, this level is expressed through overt historical narration, overt religious narration, the symbolisation of cultures, and the symbolisation of the character of Artos. The term ‘historical narrative’ here denotes a certain type of history writing: that dealing with great men, great battles, a struggle for personal power on a national scale, relations between peoples. The historical narrative is overtly expressed quite often in the book. Anecdotal details

present a picture of Britons who remember the Roman ways, Britons who want to quickly forget Rome, and barbarians who never knew Rome. Artos meets tribes who have returned to their old ways, now that the Legions have gone, and attends a Roman-style dinner party, which has become rare. He defines the Saxons as barbarians because ‘they are a younger people than we, and have never known in any way the Rule of Law.’ The presence or lack of Roman influence is noted in each land through which Artos passes, so that the military battles and the cultural clashes which drive the action of the plot are always presented as being about the fight to maintain the Roman heritage. Different people are therefore clearly delineated through the degrees of influence of Rome, since the history of Rome is well known, and the history of Britain at this time less well known. The basic conflict of the story is that between the Romano-Britons and the Saxon invaders, divided not by racial differences but by cultural beliefs. This conflict is complicated by the presence of those who are native to Britain but were not exposed to Roman practices, and hence are as likely to support the invaders as Artos’ army. At first the preferred outcome of the story is that all Britons should unite in defence of the remnants of Roman heritage in the land.

The bifurcation of British culture is expressed most clearly in the character of Artos himself. His mother was an unnamed Briton, who died when he was born, and his father a Roman, Utha. He is illegitimate, and he feels himself caught between two worlds. But as the story progresses, Artos comes to desire the joining of all the disparate elements. The symbolism of Artos’ mixed race and the pluralism he comes to embrace is something that is expressed overtly. It has, however, a deeper meaning in the text in terms of the important dichotomies of male and female, light and dark - the eternal opposites. Broadly, Roman is male and Briton female, male is light and female is dark: and the Roman Light is opposed to the coming of the Saxon Dark. In these senses, both Briton and Saxon are overrunning the vestiges of Roman civilisation.

Artos tells Guenhumara about the straight Roman cities, and about the small crooked ways behind the straight Roman ones, and how the small crooked ways go further these...
days, as the grass creeps between the wheel ruts in the grass. ‘The grass is not Roman’, Guenhumara said with a small tired whimper of laughter. ‘It flows in curves when the wind blows over’. The culture of the Britons is closely associated here with the character of the land, and the processes of nature. It is represented in opposition to the artificially rigid ways of Roman life. Since the realism of the text is grounded in description of the natural world, we must wonder where the sympathies of the text lie, even though its overt ideological support is for those who would continue the fight to preserve Roman heritage. Perhaps Sutcliff is portraying the tragedy of the Arthurian story as the struggle against the inevitable in pursuance of a questionable goal.

But however much she champions the political pluralism of Artos and his fight to save the Roman heritage for the benefit of all people, Sutcliff’s final judgement is not pluralistic. The realism of her natural world is not in the service of possible political historical events and battles, but of the essential and archetypal truth of the natural religion she believes she finds there. And the pluralism of religion that she presents is in the service of ‘oneness’, a condition Artos experiences several times during the course of his life.

In the ‘Author’s Note’, Sutcliff says that she has chosen those elements of the traditional legend that she includes in her text, because

These have the inevitability and pitiless purity of outline that one finds in classical tragedy, and that belongs to the ancient and innermost places of man. I have kept the theme, which seems to me to be implicit in the story, of the Sacred King whose divine right, ultimately, is to die for the life of the people.

The Corn King sacrifices himself for his people and is ultimately reborn. This legend contains in itself aspects of all the religions in the novel: it comes from the old religion, but also echoes Christ and Mithras. Hence, it is simple for Artos to practise a religious as well as a political pluralism because it is in keeping with the ultimate realism of

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63 ibid., p. 269.
64 John Darrah approaches the Arthurian legend in a way which he himself says is the opposite of the approach of historical fiction, but which nevertheless echoes Sutcliff’s conclusions: ‘The reality which underlies many well-known inhabitants of Camelot (and, indeed, that city itself) is not to be found in the meagre chronicles of the Dark Ages but in an oral tradition which has remembered the actions of cult figures from the heyday of the native paganism - a paganism already in decline by the time of the Roman occupation.’ John Darrah, The Real Camelot: Paganism and the Arthurian Romances, Thames and Hudson, London, 1981, p. 7.
65 Sutcliff, p. 7.
66 Frazer represents the embodiment of the spirit of the corn in a human being as a common ritual across many cultures. James Frazer, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Realism, Wordsworth Editions, Ware, 1993 (first published in one volume 1922), p. 419.
nature. This ‘reality’ he perceives as the ‘oneness of all things’ at several points in the

text. Firstly, he feels it through the drug that his half-sister Ygerna gives him, in order
to seduce him and conceive Medraut, the point in the text in which his doom is set and
his sacrifice to a greater purpose begins. The oneness is implicit in Bedwyr’s song
about the Corn King, which he sings at his first meeting with Artos, and again when
they ride into the final battle against Medraut together, reconciled after the adultery.
Artos again senses the oneness of all things, and of all religions, when he witnesses the
Lammas ceremony for the crops, where Guenhumara’s father takes on the godhead of
the Corn King. And he sees it in the death of the Roman Ambrosius, who is killed by
and kills a stag. Finally, he feels the oneness at the final battle, where Medraut and he
derive death blows to each other and bring the circle to a close.

Artos’ final understanding of the shared future of the Saxon and British
peoples, and his sacrificial death, bring together the plot elements of the disparate
peoples in their cultural mix, the dominance of the natural in the realism of the text,
and the essential and unitary nature of the world as Sutcliff sees it. The oneness is an
integral part of the structure of the text, and is also articulated in the ideology of the
history she portrays. Her realism serves to present an apparently historical sub-Roman
Britain, one shorn of the romance features of the legend. Detailed description of the
landscape of the action serves to create a verisimilitude which can help to control the
legendary connotations of the material, but at the same time this natural realism is an
expression of archetypal rhythms of nature. This conception of the mythic meaning of
Dark Ages history lies above any questions about the accuracy of the historical
representation. Sutcliff is creating an archetypal religion which matches the archetypal
features she admires in the legend, and the historical verisimilitude is the edifice which
supports this. The elements of the book which are about history are all about explana-
tion: explanation of the events of Artos’ life and of the events of that period of British
history. The elements which are about spirituality are, however, by their very nature not
able to be explained. They are mysteries, in the sense of religious ceremonies which
have the power to transform the participants and which are secret to all but the elect.

The heart of this historical novel is therefore a hermetic secret, justified by the
historical verisimilitude of the narrative, which gives the history its ‘true’ meaning and
from which the archetypal force of the legend draws its power. Nevertheless, the
novel retains history as its main organising principle: archetypes are forged, myths are

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67 For example, Sutcliff, p. 120.
68 ibid., pp. 39-40.
70 Sutcliff, pp. 242-3.
71 ibid., pp. 382-8.
72 ibid., p. 517.
created, but all of these things come into being because of the events which the characters have lived through. Sutcliff historicises the legend in order to claim the events for her own representation, but recreates its mythic force by portraying the story as the beginning of the history of the myth.