The myth of Parsifal

Once there lived a boy who was so unimportant he didn't even have a name. He was born on the edge of civilisation and raised by his mother, Heart's Sorrow. He knew nothing his father, who was dead. The boy grew up an only child, uneducated and simple, wearing homespun clothes.

During his youth, the Young Man was out playing one day when five knights rode by in all their dazzling red and gold regalia. The sight of the shining armour and weapons overwhelmed the Young Man, and he raced home to tell his mother he'd seen five gods. He announced he was leaving immediately to join them. Heart's Sorrow was greatly saddened by this, and told the boy that his father was killed as a knight, as were his two brothers. She told him this was the reason she brought him to such an isolated place to live - so that he could grow up safe, shielded from the perils of knighthood. She always knew that she could not stand in his way when his father's knightly blood began to boil in him.

Heart's Sorrow blessed her son and sent him on his way. She gave him a single homespun garment and two pieces of advice: 'respect fair damsels', and 'don't ask too many questions'. These were the legacies she bestowed upon him. He embarked happily on his journey to find the knights and become a man.

In his travels, the Young Man came upon a tent. Having grown up in a hut, he had never seen a tent before, and was truly amazed. His mother had told him of a divine cathedral, where all the nourishment he would need for his whole life would be available to him. He thought this place so grand it surely must be God's place, so he burst in to worship. Inside he found a fair maiden, and a table set out for a banquet. This confirmed his suspicions, so he sat down to eat.

He remembered his mother's instructions to respect fair damsels, so he embraced the maiden and took a talisman from her, to be his inspiration for the rest of his life. The damsel was waiting for her knight, and begged the Young Man to leave else he be killed when the knight returned. He obeyed, leaving the maiden's tent, and found that life was good, just as his mother had foretold.

The Young Man asked everyone he met of the five knights, and how he should go about becoming a knight. People told him to go to King Arthur's court. There, if he was brave and strong enough, he would be knighted. Eventually he found his way to Arthur's court, but when he suggested he wanted to be a knight, he was laughed at. They told him knighthood must be earned through a life of valour and noble deeds. But he persisted, asking over and over until he was eventually brought before King
Arthur. Arthur was kind and did not laugh, but explained how a man must learn and achieve many things before he may become a knight.

In Arthur’s court at this time there was a damsel who had neither laughed nor smiled for six years. Legend had it that when the best knight in all the world appeared, she would burst into laughter. As the damsel saw the Young Man in his homespun tunic, she did indeed burst into joyful laughter. Everyone in the court was very impressed by this. Could this really be the best knight in all the world? King Arthur knighted him on the spot.

Outrageously, the Young Man requested of Arthur the armour and horse of the infamous Red Knight - the most feared knight in the land. Again everyone laughed, but wise Arthur said "You have my permission. You may have them - if you can get them."

As the Young Man left Arthur’s court, he was met at the door by none other than the Red Knight himself. The Young Man was dazzled by the Red Knight’s trappings and regalia, but nevertheless asked him for his armour. The Red Knight was amused, but said, "You may have it - if you can get it." The Red Knight and the Young Man battled briefly, and the Young Man was knocked to the ground. It seemed the Red Knight had won and would surely kill the Young Man, but as he lay there, he threw his dagger at the Red Knight, piercing his eye and killing him. The Red Knight was the last person the Young Man ever killed. From that point on, he always chose instead to spare the lives of those he conquered. In exchange for this, he forced them to travel to Arthur’s court and swear fealty to King Arthur.

Having defeated the Red Knight, the Young Man claimed the knight's armour and horse as his own. He tried to put the armour on, but had never seen anything as complex as a buckle before and could not manage by himself. A page helped him with these matters, and tried to convince the Young Man to take off his one-piece homespun garment. The Young Man refused, clinging to the clothing given to him by his mother. Instead he put the armour on over the homespun item and rode away.

The Young Man’s next encounter on his journey was Gournamond, a godfather. Gournamond taught him information essential to his attaining manhood: "never seduce or be seduced by a fair maiden" and "you must search for the Grail castle with all his might". Specifically, when you find the castle you must ask a certain question: "Whom does the grail serve?". After receiving these instructions, the Young Man suddenly remembered his mother and went off in search of her again. He found out that Heart's Sorrow died soon after he left her.

Feeling terribly guilty, he continued his journey and met a fair damsel named
Blanche Fleur. The castle of Blanche Fleur was under siege, and she implored the Young Man to rescue her kingdom. He did exactly that, by first seeking out the second-in-command, and then the commander, of the besieging army. He duelled with each of them, then sent them in fealty to King Arthur’s court.

After raising the siege from her castle, the Young Man returned to spend one night with Blanche Fleur. They slept together in the most intimate embrace - head to head, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, knee to knee, toe to toe. Nevertheless, the embrace was chaste and worthy of the Young Man’s vow that he never seduce or be seduced by a fair maiden.

The Young Man travelled all day, and at nightfall asked someone if there was a lodge nearby where he might spend the night. He was told there was no habitation within thirty miles. Soon he found a man in a boat fishing on a lake. Again, he asked if there was any place to stay the night. The man, who was the Fisher King, invited the Young Man to his own home. "Just go down the road a little way, turn left, across the drawbridge." The Young Man followed these directions, and found the castle. The drawbridge slammed shut just as he crossed it, clipping the back hooves of his horse.

The Young Man found himself in the keep of a great castle, where four youths took his horse, bathed him and gave him fresh clothing. They then led him to the master of the castle, the Fisher King, and the whole court of the castle - four hundred knights and ladies - greeted him. A great ceremony took place, including the nightly rituals of the Grail castle. The Fisher King lay groaning in his litter while three maidens entered. The first carried the lance that pierced Christ’s side at the crucifixion, the second had the metal plate from the Christ’s Last Supper and the third held the Holy Grail itself.

A banquet was held. Everyone, except the Fisher King, drank from the Holy Grail and each was granted their greatest wish, even before they knew what it was they wished. The Fisher King’s niece brought forth a sword which the King strapped to the Young Man’s waist. This sword was to be the Young Man’s for the rest of his life. But the Young Man did not ask the question that Gournamond had told him to ask, "Whom does the Grail serve?"

Soon the King was taken from the chamber, moaning in agony. All the other knights and ladies dispersed and the Young man was escorted to his sleeping chamber by the four youths. The next morning, the Young Man found himself alone. He saddled his horse and rode across the drawbridge, which again snapped at his horses back hooves as it slammed shut. Turning about, the Young Man found the castle was nowhere to be seen.
Riding on, the Young Man came upon a tearful maiden, holding her dead knight-lover in her arms. She explained that her lover had been killed by another knight, in vengeance over something the Young Man did in one of his earlier, more naive adventures. The maiden asked where the Young Man had been, and he explained. She said that this was not possible, as there was no habitation within thirty miles. When he told her more details, she said, "Oh, you have been in the Grail castle!" The maiden asked the Young Man his name, and as the answer abruptly came to him, he blurted it out - "Parsifal".

Parsifal rode on again, and found another weeping maiden, who also had suffered through some repercussion from Parsifal's earlier, naive times. This maiden informed Parsifal that his sword would break the first time he used it, and that it could only be mended by the one who forged it. Once repaired, it would never break again.

Parsifal conquered many knights, sending them all back to Arthur's court. He rescued many damsels, lifted sieges, protected the poor, slayed many dragons. When the fame of Parsifal's deeds came back to Arthur, the King set out to find this great hero in his land. Arthur vowed "not to sleep two nights in the same bed", until he found this wonderful knight.

As Parsifal travelled on, a falcon attacked three geese that were flying over his head. Three drops of blood fell on the snow next to Parsifal and he fell abruptly into a lover's trance. He stared at the drops of blood transfixed, thinking of nothing but Blanche Fleur. It was in this state that Arthur's men found him. Two of them tried to lead him back to Arthur, but Parsifal fought them off. He broke the arm of one - a man who had jeered at him when the sad maiden laughed in Arthur's court. Parsifal had vowed to avenge her for that scorn, and that vow was now completed. Gawain, a third knight, asked Parsifal gently and humbly if he would return with them to Arthur's court, and Parsifal agreed. When they arrived, Arthur set Parsifal at the head of a court and declared a three day festival and tournament in the knight's honour.

At the very height of the festival, a most hideous damsel appeared. She rode in on a twisted mule that limped on all four feet. She recited to the court all of Parsifal's sins and stupidities, the worst being his inability to ask the healing question in the Grail castle. Parsifal was left humbled and silent before the court that had moments before been praising him. From the Hideous Damsel, Parsifal learned his new task - to find the Grail castle a second time. He vowed not to sleep in the same bed twice until he found the castle again. The hideous Damsel reminded the court that the search for the Grail required chastity from the knights and limped off, her task complete.

Parsifal then spent twenty years searching for the Grail castle. He grew more and
more bitter, more disillusioned; he grew further away from his beloved Blanche Fleur, sometimes forgetting the reason for his search. Then he came upon a group of ragged pilgrims wandering on the road. They said to him "What are you doing riding in full armour on this, the day of our Lord. It is Good Friday. Come with us to the Forest Hermit, say your confession and be shriven in preparation for Easter Sunday." Parsifal was wakened from his dark mood and went with the pilgrims to the old hermit.

Before the old hermit, Parsifal was berated again with the long list of his faults and failures. Again, the worst was his failure to ask the healing question in the Grail castle. The hermit grew gentle with Parsifal then, and took him out on the road. He gave Parsifal instructions: "go a short way, turn left and cross the drawbridge. The grail castle is always close at hand."

Parsifal followed the hermits instruction and found the castle as before - the same ceremonial procession, and the Fisher King groaning on his litter. Finally, after twenty years of experience, Parsifal asked the question: "Whom does the Grail serve?". His question was not answered, for with this question, to ask well is also to answer.

At Parsifal's question, rejoicing burst forth in the Grail castle. The Fisher King was healed, and peace and happiness finally reigned over the land.