Arthur’s two swords: compare the episodes

Read two short adaptations from Malory. Compare what happens and why it matters.

These passages adapt two episodes in Thomas Malory’s story. They are not quotations. Read them, then use their details to answer the questions.

A · The anvil and stone

A sword stood in an anvil on a large stone in a churchyard. The writing on the stone said that whoever drew it out was the rightful king. Kay needed a sword, so Arthur pulled this one free and brought it to him. Later, Arthur repeated the feat before others. In time, he was accepted as king.

B · The sword of the lake

Later, Arthur’s sword broke in a fight. Merlin led him to a lake, where an arm held up a sword. The Lady of the Lake offered Arthur the sword if he would grant her a gift when she asked for it. He agreed. Arthur and Merlin rowed out, and Arthur took the sword and its scabbard.

1. Where is each sword, and how does Arthur get it?

2. Which episode concerns becoming king? Which includes a promise?

3. Give one similarity and one difference between the episodes.

4. Are these two accounts of the same event? Explain.

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1. Location and action

A: the sword is in an anvil on a stone in a churchyard; Arthur pulls it free. B: an arm holds it above a lake; the Lady offers it, Arthur makes a promise, and he and Merlin row out to collect it.

2. Purpose and promise

A establishes Arthur’s claim to rule. B includes his promise to grant a future gift and supplies a sword after the earlier one breaks.

3. Similarities and differences

Both concern Arthur obtaining an extraordinary sword. Differences include location, who else is present, how he obtains it and its role in the story. Accept a relevant comparison supported by a detail.

4. One event or two?

They are two episodes at different times in one telling. The second follows the breaking of the earlier sword. They are not alternative eyewitness reports of a single event.

Try a different perspective

Write three sentences from Kay’s or the Lady’s point of view. Underline a detail drawn from the passage and circle a detail you invented. Label the result as your own retelling.

Sources and teaching notes

Thomas Malory, Le Morte Darthur, first printed by William Caxton in 1485. Book I, chapters V-VII cover the anvil and stone; chapter XXIII breaks Arthur’s first sword; chapter XXV gives the lake episode. These extracts simplify and compress those passages, including the repeated tests in the first episode.

The lake episode is associated with Excalibur, but names and relationships between swords vary within the wider Arthurian tradition. Do not teach a universal naming rule from this worksheet. Malory’s narrative is a literary source, not proof of a historical magical sword. The full book includes violence; this activity omits the details of the fight.

Read Malory at Project Gutenberg · Explore Arthur and Excalibur at The Myths

Suggested for ages 9+, with reading support as needed. Discuss comparisons before asking for written answers.