

PARSIFAL

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The scene is laid first in the domain and in the castle of the guardians of the Grail, Monsalvat, where the countryside resembles the northern mountains of Gothic Spain; afterwards in Klingsor's magic castle on the southern slope of the same mountains which looks towards Moorish Spain. The costume of the Knights and Squires resembles that of the Templars: a white tunic and mantle; instead of the red cross, however, there is a dove flying upwards on scutcheon and mantle.

Gurnemanz, Knight of the Grail, rises from sleep and rouses his two young esquires in a forest near the castle of Monsalvat in the Spanish Pyrenees. Two other knights arrive to prepare a morning bath for the King, Amfortas, who has an apparently incurable wound. They are interrupted by the wild woman Kundry, who has brought balsam from Arabia to alleviate the King's suffering. The King, carried in on a litter, accepts her gift and proceeds to the lake. Gurnemanz tells his companions how a beautiful woman betrayed Amfortas into the hands of the magician Klingsor, so that the sacred Spear was lost and with it the King wounded. In a vision, the King has been told that he will be cured by a pure fool.

Suddenly there are cries from the lake and a swan falls to the ground, fatally injured by an arrow. The knights drag in a youth who, rebuked by Gurnemanz, breaks his bow but cannot give his name. Kundry is able to do so: the youth is Parsifal, son of Gamuret and Herzeleide. As Kundry crawls away to sleep in the undergrowth, the knights carry Amfortas back from the lake. Gurnemanz follows them with the boy, wondering what to make of him.

In the hall of the Grail Castle, Amfortas is surrounded by his knights who prepare for the Grail ritual. The voice of his father Titurel is heard from the crypt, bidding Amfortas uncover the Grail and perform the magic that sustains the aged hero. Amfortas at first refuses, as the ritual brings on his pain. At length he submits and allows the esquires to uncover the chalice, which produces food and drink to sustain the knights. Parsifal watches but seems to understand nothing; although at one point when Amfortas cries out in pain, he lays his hand on his heart. At the end of the ceremony, Gurnemanz angrily drives the boy away. As he is about to leave, the knight hears a mysterious voice repeat the words of the prophecy.

Seated in his dark tower, Klingsor summons Kundry and instructs her to seduce Parsifal, whom he has seen approaching in his magic mirror. Kundry resists in vain, since the magician knows how to control her through the curse. She disappears and the scene changes to a magic garden, in which the Flower Maidens bloom. They attempt to seduce Parsifal, who plays with them, until the appearance of Kundry, transformed into a beautiful siren. She awakens his memories of childhood and of his mother. His resistance apparently broken, she offers him a passionate kiss. To her amazement, the youth recoils in horror. At last he understands the nature of Amfortas' suffering and his own neglected mission. Kundry tries to win him through pity for her, accursed since she laughed at the suffering of Christ. In desperation she calls for help from Klingsor, who appears on the rampart and hurls the spear at Parsifal.

The spear stops in the air, suspended over Parsifal's head. He grasps it and makes the sign of the cross, at which Klingsor's tower crumbles and the garden withers. You will know where to find me again, he tells Kundry as he walks away.

Gurnemanz, now an aged hermit, once again finds the sleeping Kundry, still and apparently lifeless, in the undergrowth near his hut. As he revives her, a strange knight, in full armour and carrying a spear, approaches. Gurnemanz reproaches him for bearing arms on this most holy of days, Good Friday. Then he recognises the sacred spear and the knight as the boy who had once killed a swan. Parsifal describes his long and weary wanderings in search of Monsalvat. The hermit reveals that the Community of the Grail has long been in decay, since Amfortas refuses to uncover the chalice, and Titurel has died. Parsifal laments that he had arrived too late to save him.

Gurnemanz and Kundry help him to remove his armour. Today shall Parsifal bring healing to the Grail King and take over his office and duties. Gurnemanz anoints him as King and Kundry washes his feet. In return, he baptises her and kisses her on her forehead. She weeps. Parsifal gazes upon the beauty of the spring meadows. The hermit tells him that this is the magic of Good Friday, when all creation gives thanks. The tolling of distant bells summon them to the funeral rites of Titurel.

In the hall of the Grail Castle, all is gloom and despair. The knights are barely alive and approach Amfortas threateningly. Amfortas begs them end his suffering by taking his life. Parsifal strides into the centre of the hall and touches Amfortas' wound with the sacred spear, declaring him healed and relieved of his duties. He returns the spear, which begins to bleed. He orders that the Grail shall be uncovered and raises it aloft as the knights, including Amfortas, kneel in homage. Kundry falls dead at his feet.

Act 1 - In the first act, in the "holy ground" outside the Grail castle, Parsifal feels an intimation of pity after killing the swan. (The scene with the swan is peripheral to the outer action but crucial to the inner.)

In witnessing Amfortas' agony during the Grail ceremony in the castle, he feels a compulsive pain in his own heart, but he does not yet dare to the "redeeming question": his compassion is still dull and inarticulate. (The motivation seems to have become confused: would Amfortas be relieved of his agony if Parsifal asked the cause of it at this point? Or must he wait for the return of the spear which he lost to Klingsor when he succumbed to Kundry? Die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur, der sie schlug. (Only the spear that struck it heals the wound.) The answer lies in the interrelationship of pragmatic and symbolic elements, which is the principle underlying the dramatic structure of Parsifal: the spear that heals the wound is to be interpreted as a symbol of compassion, the reversal of will as Schopenhauer understood it. This compassion is not a negative emotion but insight into the suffering of the world, and the only consolation for it is recognition of the lack of any consolation, in other words, resignation.)

Act 2 - In the second act, Parsifal, the pure fool, is made cosmically clear-sighted by Kundry's kiss. He feels in himself the temptation, the longing and suffering of Amfortas, and perceives the world as the aggregation of common guilt and an unending circle of misery, which can be broken only by compassion and renunciation, by rejection of the will and its blind urging and compulsion.

Act 3 - The events of the third act, Kundry's baptism, Amfortas's healing and the redemption of the Grail from guilt-stained hands - the hands of Amfortas as the representative of a world of entanglement and compromises - are nothing more than the fulfilment of what is already foreseeable at the end of the second, once Parsifal has regained the spear. (Parsifal's wanderings in search of the Grail, which are portrayed in the prelude to the third act, are a check on the progress of the action but do not affect the outcome.)

But although the last act is uneventful by the normal dramatic criteria it is not just a ritual, the mere enactment and symbolic representation of a long foregone conclusion. It presents a third stage in the inner action: the compassion that is a dull sensation in the first act, and widens into recognition, cosmic perception [Welthellsicht] in the second, is at last directed outwards in the third as a deed of redemption. Parsifal becomes the Grail King, not an anchorite, and does not turn his back on the world.