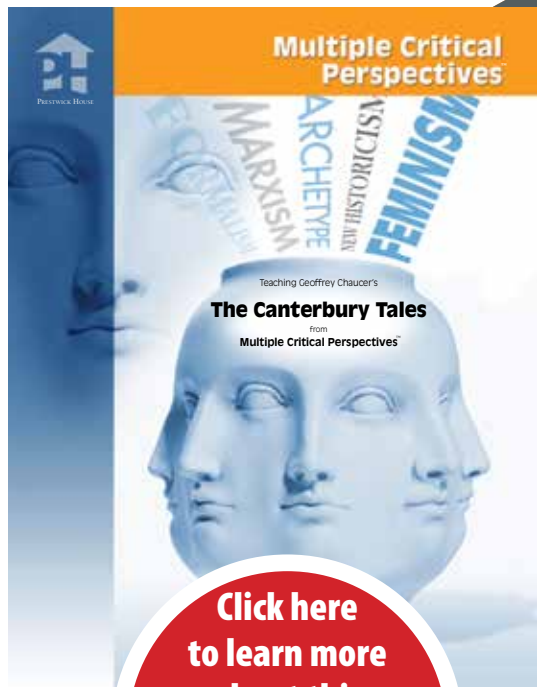




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Teaching Geoffrey Chaucer's

The Canterbury Tales

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by

Stephanie Polukis



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General Introduction to the Work

Chaucer's Life and Historical Context

THE 14TH CENTURY was a tumultuous era of English history, when the very foundations of society were shaken by war, disease, and rebellion. It was a period of both internal and international conflict, in which the Hundred Years' War created enmity between England and France, while social discord, bloodshed, and corruption raged at home. In this era of relative chaos, Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer was born circa 1343 into a middle-class family of vintners. As a young man, he served as a page in the household of Prince Lionel, the Duke of Clarence, and his wife, Elizabeth de Burgh, the Countess of Ulster. Chaucer quickly became a favorite of the noble family, and he followed Lionel to France and fought in the Hundred Years' War. One year later, in 1360, Chaucer was captured and held for a ransom of £16, which King Edward III paid. Once back in England, the writer served as the Comptroller of London, collecting customs taxes on wool and leather. In addition, he held other civil servant jobs. In 1366, he married Philippa de Roet and raises four children with her: Thomas, Lewis, Agnes, and Elizabeth. Meanwhile, Chaucer wrote many famous works of literature, including *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Book of the Duchess*, *Triolus and Criseyde*, and of course, *The Canterbury Tales*.

Since Chaucer's background and occupation brought him into contact with people of all social classes, the writer was exposed to the discontent of the lower class, the corruption of the aristocracy and Church, and the lifestyle of the military. The political and social outrages of medieval England were satirized in *The Canterbury Tales*, and while the text is still significant and poignant to modern-day audiences, the tales are more meaningful when viewed in their historical context.

One important historical factor was the Black Death, or bubonic plague, which killed 20% of England's population in the 1350s. The largest percentage of those who died were serfs and peasants, who lived in unsanitary, squalid conditions and had a greater exposure to the disease. As a result, there was a shortage of laborers, and those few who survived knew that lords needed vassals to tend their land. The commoners unionized, demanded higher wages, and—when Richard II levied a heavy poll tax to support the war with France—rebelled. This Peasants' Revolt of 1381 is alluded to in the “Nun's Priest's Tale.”

As the traditional, albeit oppressive, social structure was being shaken, and families were being devastated by the plague, the people sought solace in the God of Christianity, putting their faith in predestination and the hope of a peaceful afterlife. The Church, however, was filled with corrupt clergy, who valued monetary gain and personal advancement over charity and moral living. Rather than being won by election, as had been the custom, church livings (called Benefices) were sold by the Pope. The result was that many parishes were served by the younger sons of noblemen who stood to inherit nothing of their fathers' estates but could live comfortably on the income of church lands. Several actually held

Formalist Approach Applied to *The Canterbury Tales*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

The formalist approach to literature was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is sometimes dismissed as rigid and inaccessible, held as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Analyzing Genre in *The Canterbury Tales*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Genres in *The Canterbury Tales*.
2. Divide the students into at least five groups and assign each group one of the following tales:
 - The Knight's Tale
 - The Miller's Tale
 - The Tale of the Wife of Bath
 - The Pardoner's Tale
 - The Nun's Priest's Tale
3. Have each group read the description of each literary genre and decide to which genre their assigned tale belongs.
4. Have each group answer the following questions:
 - What is your tale's genre?
 - How does the tale meet the qualifications of that genre?
 - Does the tale deviate from its genre in any way? If so, how, and what do you think is Chaucer's intent for that deviation?
 - What is the central message of the tale?
 - How does the specific genre enhance the tale's meaning?
 - What relationship is apparent between the tale, its genre, and its teller? How does this relationship enhance the tale's meaning?
5. Bring the class back together and have each group present its findings.

Optional Assignment: Ask each group to choose another genre from the list. Then, have the students discuss how the same message of their tale could have been presented in another form. (For example: How would "The Nun's Priest's Tale" be re-written as a fable?)

Marxist Approach Applied to *The Canterbury Tales*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

The Marxist approach to literature is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major assertion was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that civilization was progressing toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power) should be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism, the power of the worker to overcome social and economic abuses, became the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed that literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression existed in the political subconscious of a society—social hierarchies are inherent in any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Studying Courtly Love as a Bourgeois Social Convention

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Canterbury Tales*: Marxism Activity One Questions in Preparation for Discussion.
2. Have each student create a table with two columns. The first one should be labeled “The Knight’s Tale” and the second should be labeled “The Miller’s Tale.”
3. Have students, individually or in pairs, review the two stories, noting in the first column of their table all evidence of the Courtly Love motif in “The Knight’s Tale” and all evidence (however parodied) of the courtly love motif from “The Miller’s Tale” in the second.
4. Have the students answer the following questions (on handout):
 - Are the lover(s) and the love object(s) of “The Knight’s Tale” sympathetic or unsympathetic? Why or how?
 - Are the lover(s) and the love object(s) of “The Knight’s Tale” portrayed as noble or base? Why or how?
 - Are the lover(s) and the love object(s) of “The Miller’s Tale” sympathetic or unsympathetic? Why or how?
 - Are the lover(s) and the love object(s) of “The Miller’s Tale” portrayed as noble or base? Why or how?
 - From what class(es) do the lover(s) and the love object(s) of “The Knight’s Tale” come?
 - What evidence indicates this?
 - From what class(es) do the lover(s) and the love object(s) of “The Miller’s Tale” come?
 - What evidence indicates this?
 - Which tale has the more noble, inspiring, or happy ending?
 - What about this ending makes it noble, inspiring, or happy?
 - What about the ending of the other tale makes it *not* noble, inspiring, or happy?
 - Which tale is a more serious example of the Courtly Love tale? Why or how?
 - What connection is there among:
 - the nature of the tale itself,
 - the sympathetic nature of the characters,
 - the nature of the ending,
 - and the social classes of characters of the respective tales?
5. Reconvene the class and discuss what can be inferred about Courtly Love as a literary and social convention based on the comparison of the two tales. Is there evidence of Courtly Love being a convention devised by the bourgeoisie to stifle the aspirations of the proletariat?

Feminist Theory Applied to *The Canterbury Tales*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

Feminism is an evolving philosophy, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many works in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Analyzing Stereotypes about Women

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Locating Examples of Female Stereotypes in *The Canterbury Tales*. (Each student may need several copies.)
2. In general class discussion, briefly brainstorm a list of female stereotypes. List ideas on the board, generating separate lists: generally positive stereotypes and generally negative ones.
3. Review with the class the Wife of Bath's "Prologue" and "Tale" and have them record on the handout any stereotypes about women that are apparent.
4. Divide the class into three groups, or a number of groups divisible by three.
5. Assign each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following:
 - the Knight's "Prologue" and "Tale" (You may want to divide the class into enough groups so that each of the four parts of the Knight's Tale is assigned as a separate story.)
 - the Miller's "Prologue" and "Tale"
 - the Nun's Priest's "Prologue" and "Tale"
6. Have each group examine its assigned selection and complete the chart.
7. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings. The other students can add the information from the other groups to their charts.
8. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - In general, do *The Canterbury Tales* stereotypes provide a positive or negative view of women?
 - Is Chaucer's overall depiction of women accurate? Legitimate? Why or why not?
 - What seems to be the overall purpose for Chaucer's depicting women as he does (e.g., comedy, satire/criticism, parody, etc.)?
 - Does Chaucer's depiction of women suggest that masculine power oppresses women? Why or why not?
 - Would you say that, overall, Chaucer seems to be sensitive to feminist issues? Why or why not?