

The Influence of Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes in Medieval Romance and Story-Telling

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INTRODUCTION

Medieval Literature and History in the High School Classroom

Teaching medieval literature and history to high school students is a challenge since it is important to make the subject matter relevant to the students' lives, many of whom think that yesterday is history. Themes and stories can spark interesting class discussions. This curriculum unit can be used in the English or social studies classroom. This unit is especially conducive for teaching cross-curricular units between the two departments. Arthurian legends are taught freshman, sophomore and senior years, so this unit can be used for several preps. Middle and elementary school teachers can modify or simplify the lessons to suit their students. The four-fold method of interpreting a story can give students insight into how medieval people thought. It is customary to use one's own experiences to interpret a work; however, the realization that medieval people did not think the same way that people in the twenty-first century do can be a valuable lesson in a culturally diverse classroom. Viewing the world through another's perspective can be enlightening and interesting to the high school students.

The British versions of the Arthurian romances are usually taught to high school students. This curriculum unit concentrates on the French writers. The unit also includes the comparison of women's and men's perspectives on similar stories in the stories by Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes. The curriculum unit emphasizes the King Arthur Legends from a female viewpoint in *the Lais of Marie de France* and the male point of view in *Arthurian Romances* by Chretien de Troyes. Most Medieval units focus on the time period before the year 1000 with *Beowulf* and the fourteenth century with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Mallory's fifteenth century version of *Le Morte d' Arthur* is usually the Arthurian legend found in the high school textbook. Chretien de Troyes and Marie de France bridge the gap with stories that are from the twelfth century when the code of chivalry and knights in shining armor were not a waning phenomenon. French and linguistic teachers could compare the original stories in Old French to contemporary language. Students can gain an understanding of how medieval people thought by trying to interpret literature in the four levels of interpretation. This medieval unit gives high school students the opportunity to widen their horizons and read legends that are different from the traditional curriculum.

ACADEMIC SETTING

Houston is a culturally diverse community and the large high school where I teach advanced academic senior English is a microcosm of the city's demographics. There are over 3,000 students and they have a choice of regular, advanced academic or AP-IB English. The students in the advanced academic program are motivated and most of the students are college-bound. The program is a writing portfolio program combined with the traditional Texas curriculum. I teach students to practice their higher thinking skills and to be confident enough in their own evaluation of works of literature to contribute to class discussions. The students are required to do their reading as homework. The reason I chose the French medieval authors as my curriculum unit

when I teach British literature is to challenge my students and myself to go beyond the basic requirements and learn something that is not traditionally taught in a regular high school English class. Many of the students are in honors classes in other disciplines, but they may not feel comfortable enough with their writing skills to take the English honors class. There are many students who are capable, but may not have the time to devote to multiple honors classes due to athletic, extra-curricular, or work obligations. The students are confident enough to ask the tough questions and they are motivated enough to do much of the work on their own. As I teach the material, I also teach study skills, such as note-taking. A major project in the spring is the MLA research paper. I encourage students to cull material from the fall semester to use as research or for comparison papers. I teach the course with the assumption that it may be the last literature class that some of my students will ever take, and I want them to graduate with a thorough knowledge of British literature.

I studied medieval literature, including Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes in graduate school several years ago. At that time I was a graduate student and a Fellow at the Houston Teacher Institute, my students were willing to do the extra work because they realized that I knew what it was like to be a student and that I also had obligations and homework after school. It was an opportunity to model diligence, commitment, and time management skills. Students are aware of fairness, and they are willing to attempt the reasonable requests. They appreciate a compassionate teacher who is concerned with what is beneficial to them. If extra work or more difficult assignments are given for the purpose of improving skills and not just busy-work, then the cooperation is there. Finding subjects of interest and making it relevant to their lives is an added bonus.

I always include the historical background of the literature as an introduction and to employ the cross-curricular concept by combining social studies with English. This appears to be the direction in which the state requirements are going, so it is helpful to be proactive and begin the process voluntarily. There are some teachers who combine assignments. For instance, if a sophomore student has to write an MLA research paper for English and history at the same time, they can be combined rather than making the student do double the work. If the student is going to learn the concept doing it correctly the first time, then I see no benefit in the student struggling in two subject areas. The history teacher can assign the subject and provide the research time and materials while the English teacher teaches the MLA format and helps the students organize their research materials. When the paper is submitted, the history teacher grades the content and the English teacher grades the structure, grammar and mechanics. This mutual relationship is beneficial to teachers and, especially, to students.

BACKGROUND

The Medieval Period is complex in it covers literally hundreds of years, a more diverse output of literature than all the other time periods combined. This curriculum unit is geared toward teaching medieval literature, the twelfth century in particular, in the senior English classroom. Medieval studies begin right away in senior English with British literature, including *The Canterbury Tales* and the King Arthur Legends. For example, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” and “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” are taught in the fall if the senior British literature curriculum is taught chronologically. During the spring semester in the English classroom, a study of the Victorian’s interpretation of the King Arthur legends can be compared to the stories from the middle ages. This teaches students about the importance of understanding interpretation, and it connects a current lesson to a previous one.

By the senior year, the students have accumulated a body of knowledge in literature, so they are familiar with the allusions and comparisons of one similar work to another. Teaching

comparison and critical analysis are priorities, and the various romances are conducive to these writing genres.

Arthurian legends are taught twice during the senior year. Since British literature is taught chronologically, the students read them early in the fall semester. In the spring, they are taught from the Victorian perspective, since there was a nostalgic resurgence of interest in the idealized, romanticized times of the Middle Ages. Seniors could compare the difference in perspective regarding the legends and, as a cross-curricular activity, they could study the historical events to gain an understanding about the reason behind that interest. For instance, the Industrial Revolution and the rapidly changing world of the nineteenth century may have contributed to the longing for a simpler, idealized time period. This lesson can also expand the high school student's horizon beyond the limited scope of the here and now.

Seniors need to learn how to think and write on multiple levels in order to be successful in college. The lesson on the four levels of interpretation and the subsequent historical information concerning the different way in which medieval people lived and thought, may open young minds to the concept that people of different backgrounds, experiences, and thought processes can get along. Students may not have considered the idea that people in previous centuries may have processed information differently than we do in the twenty-first century. When most of the literature was oral, the connotation of the word, illiterate, takes on a different perspective. Memorizing hundreds of lines is a skill that few high school students today can master; however, a study of rhythms, phrasing, parallelism, etc. can help them to gain an understanding of the process. Comparing medieval poems, epics and songs to present-day rap lyrics, slam poetry and sermons may be an interesting topic for some students in the class.

How politics played a role in literature is relevant to teach to seniors since they are taking government and economics at the same time. France's power was great at the time that Chretien de Troyes and Marie de France were honing their craft. Marie's benefactors, the Plantagenet dynasty, dominated France and Philip, Chretien's benefactor, was very successful (McKitterick 124). Other historical events that students could research are: the feudal system, medieval royalty, the court system, the Crusades, wars, the development of towns and the establishment of universities.

"The second half of the twelfth century was in France a period of intense literary activity" (Lais 20). Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes contributed to this development and they are authors whose literary works should be introduced to the high school student.

Medieval Women

Literature in the public high school curriculum is so male-author dominated, that this particular unit will be a refreshing change for the students. Students can read Marie de France's stories or the anonymously written Icelandic Sagas to learn about the equality of women in the Middle Ages. In the English classroom, it is effective to begin a unit with historical background and the perspective of the time in which the literature was created. Students may be interested in the difference of society's view of women in medieval times as compared to the present. They need to learn to see other points of view and motives other than the ones that they have learned or experienced in their own lives. Women were often the authors of medieval literature, although many are works are not attributed to a particular person, so anonymous must suffice in place of a name. It is known that a French woman by the name of Marie did write lais or poems. More information on Marie will follow.

The most powerful women in Europe, the ones that controlled family fortunes, were the widows of the aristocracy. In some noble families the woman was more powerful and had a more royal lineage than the man, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine when she was married to King Henry II.

Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* and the *Prioress* are literary examples of medieval women. The focus of the protagonist in many romantic stories often was a woman, such as Guenevere in Chretien's "Lancelot (the Knight in the Cart)."

"The nature of romance may be seen clearly from a comparison with epic, which is the literature of the more warlike and male-centred (sic) society that dominated in western Europe until the twelfth century" (Pearsall 21). While many medieval stories indicate that Europe was a male dominated society, stories, such as the Icelandic Sagas and some of the romances portray women as equals in Middle Ages. Students can research and compare how the southern regions of Europe differed from the northern regions in their portrayal of women. Teaching the class about the roles of men and women in medieval Europe is a good introduction to romance.

Romance

Chretien de Troyes invented the literary form of the novel and the romance form of the novel and the *lais* of Marie de France are the first appearance of the short story in Medieval literature:

Romance is the literature of chivalry and exists to reflect, celebrate and confirm the chivalric values by which its primary consumers, the noble or knightly class, live or purport to live. It does not record their way of life so much as how they would like to think of themselves and be thought of as living, without the frustrations and expediences of real life. Romance purges life of impurities and presents chivalry in heightened and idealized form. Northern France in the late twelfth century-the society of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de Champagne and the clerk-poet Chretien de Troyes, leisured, wealthy, sophisticated, woman-orientated, culturally ambiguous- is the most exciting venue for the new romance. (Pearsall 21)

Romance, particularly Arthurian romance, was a result of a new audience, civilized courts, and the new idea that emotions are not a malady, but rather "an attribute to be valued for its potential to inspire nobility of behaviour" (Pearsall 22). Medieval literature and society prior to the twelfth century concentrated, not on the individual, but on the group or society in general. "Romance...deals in adventure, not survival" (21). The focus of the story changed. A definition of romance in a Texas high school senior textbook is as follows:

The romance has been a popular narrative since the Middle Ages. Generally, the term *romance* refers to any imaginative adventure concerned with noble heroes, gallant love, a chivalric code of honor and daring deeds. Romances usually have faraway settings, depict events unlike those of ordinary life, and idealize their heroes as well as the eras in which the heroes lived. Medieval romances are also lighthearted in tone and involve fantasy." ("Sir Gawain" 209)

The two twelfth century authors that have written some of the best medieval romance poems and stories are Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes.

The Lais of Marie de France

Most of the following material comes from the Penguin Classic, *The Lais of Marie de France*. The introduction is thorough and it is comprehensible to a high school audience. The *Lais* are the first appearance of short stories. What is known about Marie is that she was of French descent, living and working in England. This is the first appearance, from the French perspective, of contemporary Arthurian stories. Marie de France was writing in England about 1160-1180 (Pearsall 25). Textual Evidence: the translated 56-line Prologue and twelve poems are found in a thirteenth-century manuscript in the British Library. They were first published in 1819. They were originally written in Old French. They are: *Guigemar*, *Equitan*, *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, *Lanval*, *Deus Amanz*, *Yonec*, *Laustic*, *Milun*, *Chaitivel*, *Chevrefoil* and *Eliduc*. Some

readers believe that *Guigemar* was composed first. Marie's lais were circulating in British courts during 1170-80's. She was connected with the Plantagenet royal family and people can only speculate who Marie was. At least one by the name of Marie was writing in the second half of the twelfth century. Some believe that the twelve stories were written by different authors, perhaps even by a man. She was probably not Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter, Marie de Champagne. She was an educated lady who knew Latin. She had a sound knowledge of English and the life and aspirations of the nobility. Marie might have been Marie, countess of Boulogne (1154). Scholars have concluded that she was of French descent and upbringing, living and working in England. Marie composed the lais for the English court and the Plantagenets (*Lais* 17).

The shortest lai, *Chevrefoil*, is 118 lines and the longest is *Eliduc* at 477 lines. These twelve stories tell about the life of one or more individuals, a special period or event, sometimes unexpected. Heard by the Bretons who composed a lay (a short lyrical composition sung to the accompaniment of a harp or other instrument. These are Breton lays or short stories in French. Marie's Lais are not intended to be sung. The lais were popular with aristocratic men and, especially, women. Various facts about the lais include: the heroines in the lays are likeable and resourceful. They run risks and manage to see their lovers at regular intervals. God is on the side of the virtuous characters and he will punish the wicked. The lai resembles the lyric because love is described as intense and the time-span is short. It concentrates on the crisis which is the core of the narrative.

The lai begins in a position of lack and crisis and it is resolved into a period of happiness. The happiness is confronted with a test which leads to a satisfactory or unsatisfactory resolution. Love is more spontaneous than the love found in romances. Marie concentrates on the individuality of her characters. The lais address the reciprocal duties of individual and society and the balance of love and chivalry. "While it is often fruitless to look for great psychological depth in characters from medieval literature in general... it is even more fruitless in such a short genre as the *lai*" (33). In *Lanval*, the hero reveals their love after his lady commands him not to tell anyone. *Yonec* is about a character who is condemned to live without love. Love leads to death in *Laustic*. In *Lanval*, *Yonec*, and *Laustic*, Marie does not disapprove of the adultery between the unmarried lover and an unhappily married lady. Marie is not interested in fighting. The fairy world does not have demonic influences. Some of the lais contain supernatural elements. In *Guigemar*, *Lanval* and *Yonec*, the protagonist comes into contact with the Otherworld. Supernatural elements can be found in the lais as well as in romance. Marie is interested in the injustice done to a man by his wife. The lais were popular in Scandinavia and England (35-6).

The following is a list of Romance traits that are found in *The Lais of Marie de France*:

- Truth claim: the narrator professes the story to be true
- The story is based on legendary history
- There is tension between public and private life
- Characters demonstrate the twin values of courage and courtesy
- The focus is on love and sexual relations- the courtly lover and the tough guy
- The best love is a secret love.

The concept of love is an element in the lais. "Love as presented in the Lais seems a more spontaneous phenomenon than the love we frequently find in the romance, but this may be due again to the fundamental brevity of of the genre" (27).

In order to quickly know what the lais are about, I have reduced the plots to an annotation:

Guigemar is allegorical, involving a white stag, a wounded hero and a suffering lover. The lovers end up together.

Equitan addresses love. Love is not honorable, unless it is based on equality. The moral of the lai: “Evil can easily rebound on him who seeks another’s misfortune.”

Le Fresne is about two knights who were neighbors. One knight’s wife was deceitful and arrogant. It was believed that male twins were the product of two men, so the conflict involves getting rid of one of the children. The story also has twin sisters. It has a happy ending.

Bisclavret is about a werewolf. Bisclavret is betrayed by his wife who is punished at the end of the lai.

Lanval is a King Arthur legend. Sir Gawain is one of the characters.

Les Deus Amanz is about two young lovers in Normandy who both met their end because of love.

Yonec is about a woman imprisoned in a tower, the fairy world of Celtic romance and the hero Yonec who would avenge them and kill his enemy, and a son. They suffer sorrow and grief for their love.

Laustic is about two knights, forbidden love, and a nightingale.

Milun is Welsh. He comes to the rescue of a woman in trouble, then loses his love to another. He sends a message to her, tied to the neck of his pet swan. They communicated with the swan as messenger. This has a happy ending.

Chaitivel takes place in Brittany. The woman had four lovers and they compete in a tournament.

Chevrefoil is about a hero who is banished to the forest in Wales, true love and vindication.

Eliduc takes place in Brittany and it is about a knight, a loyal wife and a young maiden.

A follow-up lesson that helps the students to understand the performance of storytelling is the explanation of troubadours and jongleurs as entertainers. This can emphasize the importance of rhythm and repetition in oral tradition. More details about jongleurs and troubadours follow in the short story section.

In the (translated) words of Marie in the Prologue: “Anyone who has received from God the gift of knowledge and true eloquence has a duty not to remain silent: rather should one be happy to reveal such talents.” This quotation may offer encouragement to the budding writers in the classroom.

Marie uses romance devices, such as interior monologue and dialogue in her lais. “Another element that links the *lai* to the romance is the supernatural” (33). She does not use romantic elements as much as Chretien de Troyes did (33).

Chretien de Troyes

Chretien de Troyes invented the literary form of the novel in the Arthurian Romances. His stories had a beginning, a middle, and an end. It was a new concept in writing in a world that was used to being able to pick up a story, whether it be oral or written at any point. The narrative structure was not crucial to the story prior to Chretien employing that technique. “Chretien de Troyes, commonly regarded as the father of Arthurian romance and a key figure in Western literature, composed in French in the latter part of the twelfth century” (Chretien de Troyes, “Note on the Author and Translator” 1). A book could be read from anywhere in the text prior to that. Chretien de Troyes signed his name to his works, which was unusual for the time (Wilhelm 123). During the Middle Ages, the individual was not tantamount, and nobody wrote about emotions. The idea of true love was probably invented by Chretien de Troyes in his Arthurian romances. “Chretien set the course of Arthurian literature in the Middle Ages, and not only

because he was the first to write Arthurian romances” (Lacy 72). Chretien borrowed from the courtly love poetry of southern France and blended epic adventure with troubadour courtly love. It was, for the twelfth century, very humanistic and a discovery of the individual. This is a change from previous works. It is believed by some scholars that Chretien used subtle humor in some of his stories and he didn't take every story seriously.

Chretien de Troyes had two patrons that allowed him the time and privilege to write his romances. “Marie, the great-granddaughter of the first known troubadour, had inherited from her mother, the remarkable Eleanor of Aquitaine who was queen successively of France and England, a taste for culture and the sophisticated manners of the southern French courts. In Count Philip, Chretien served a man who not only wielded great power in the land, but was also much noted for his piety and liberality (a signal virtue in a patron) and for the richness of his court. The poet moved, then, in a world of high aristocracy” (Chretien de Troyes xii). Chretien de Troyes makes reference to his benefactors in the introductions of his stories. For example, in “Lancelot (The Knight of the Cart),” the first sentence begins with, “Since my lady of Champagne wishes me to undertake the writing of a romance, I shall very gladly do so as one who (and I utter no word of flattery) is entirely at her disposal for the performance of any task in the world” (Chretien de Troyes 185). The complements continue and he gives the lady full credit for his inspiration (185).

The King Arthur legends presented by Chretien de Troyes are a good foil to the legends presented by Marie de France because they present the same characters, however, from a male point of view. For instance, “Lancelot (the Knight of the Cart)” is an excellent example of the romances written in the middle ages, often to please a lady sponsor. In this case, Chretien de Troyes refers in the opening passage to “my lady of Champagne.” The author explains in his story the meaning of the cart and an explanation of love and courtliness.

“Lancelot (The Knight of the Cart)”

“Lancelot (The Knight of the Cart)” is probably the most well-known of Chretien de Troyes’ Arthurian legends. The characters are familiar to most high school students who are familiar with Arthurian legends and know about the relationship between Lancelot and Queen Genevieve. This story would be appropriate for upperclassmen. King Arthur plays a secondary character in Chretien’s romances. It stands to reason that the French knight, Lancelot, would get more attention from a French writer. “Lancelot is the greatest of all knights, by far, greatest in prowess, courtesy and honour” (Pearsall 47). Lancelot suffers the greatest humiliation when he must swap his horse for a cart, symbolically and literally the mode of transportation for criminals. “Once a knight has been in a cart, he suffers shame on earth” (Chretien de Troyes 191). What a man will sacrifice for someone he loves or something he believes in is an excellent discussion topic that high school students can relate to on the literary and personal level. Lancelot remains faithful to his lady, although he is tempted by another damsel. “The knight has only one heart; and that no longer belongs to him, but is entrusted to someone else, so that he cannot lend it out elsewhere” (201). Lancelot finds Guenevere’s comb, which might remind some students of “The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry. Guenevere in the tower may be compared to Rapunzel or the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. The medieval tales predate most of the stories that students may offer as suggestions for comparison. This romance is 190 pages long and it is wordy. High school students can handle it if they are not offended by the suggestive content in some scenes. It does give the reader insight into the character, Lancelot.

“Percival: the Story of the Grail”

“Percival” is a good story to teach high school students because of the youth and hero themes. “Percival” is divided into three parts: the youthful adventure of a hero, the visit to the Grail castle and the adventure of Gawain (Loomis 60). Since “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”

is taught to seniors, this is a good opportunity for comparison. Percival was drawn to Arthur and the idea of chivalry. The idea of going on a quest no matter what the cost or consequences could be compared to other works or current events. There is an opportunity to teach a lesson about the importance of asking questions. If Percival asked the question about the grail, the Fisher King would have been healed (Lacy 317; Loomis 60). Another father figure was King Arthur himself (Lacy 69). Perceval has the Coming of Age theme and a quest. The students could explore the wasteland theme and the idea of the connection between the sickness of the king and the devastation of the land. Whether or not it is a cause and effect would make a good discussion topic for class (Weston 15-16). The poem of Chretien de Troyes is “our earliest surviving literary version” (191). The story was a romance according to Chretien (161); students can explore what makes it a romance.

“Cliges”

The story of “Cliges” may have the same origin as the story borrowed by William Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* in that the female character, Fenne, fakes her own death. Other connections that high school students can make is to Greek myths and Sir Gawain: Cliges is his nephew (Lacy 299). This story was not from Welsh legend, but from classical and oriental tales “that were beginning to circulate in the West...the geography is recognizable, and there are even allusions to contemporary European events” (Pearsall 31). It is an interesting story about the Greek emperor, Alexander who goes to King Arthur’s court to be knighted by him. Cliges is his son.

The author, referring to the former, states with certainty that this story “will henceforth always be remembered as long as Christendom endures” (Chretien de Troyes 1).

“Erec and Enide”

This poem has Celtic motifs and may be a little confusing to the high school student.

King Arthur and his knights went out one morning to chase the white stag. Queen Guenevere followed with her escort, Erec. He was armed with only a sword, and they met a fully armed knight. Following the knight, Erec is entertained by the father of the beautiful Enid. Erec and Enid fall in love and make plans for marriage at King Arthur’s court (Loomis 35-6). The poem includes a test of Enid’s fidelity that could be compared to Chaucer’s “Oxford Scholar’s Tale.”

“Yvain”

“Yvain” is a good example of a well-constructed plot (Loomis 57). It has Celtic influences. Yvain is Breton and it can be compared to Shaw’s *Androcles and the Lion* or *Kulhwch and Olwen*. It may be confusing for high school students. The duel between the Knight of the Lion and Sir Gawain may be of interest. The conflict between Yvain and his wife is a lesson in forgiveness. There is a parallel between Yvain and Erec. In “Eric,” he is distracted from tournaments by his wife and Yvain is distracted from tournaments by his wife. The same general pattern of both stories is as follows: “wooing and winning of a beautiful bride, marriage, estrangement, probation, forgiveness, and reconciliation” (58).

King Arthur Legends

A look at both Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes can give insight into the French perspective of the King Arthur Legends as well as the male and female points of view. It is ironic that the first known Arthurian legends were written by a Frenchman, Chretien de Troyes. Lancelot’s elevated status and King Arthur as a secondary character are due to this fact. A comparison can be made to the Welsh stories in *The Mabinogian*, the fourteenth century version by Mallory, the twentieth century version by John Steinbeck, or even the similarities in George Lucas’s *Star Wars* series.

Storytellers and Novelists

The Medieval time period was a time when stories were told in the oral tradition and they were written for the increasingly literate population. “Until 1100 books were rare and were usually only found in monastery libraries ... After 1200 books became more common, especially when the first universities opened in Paris and Bologna” (Langley 40). Seniors may be interested in finding out more about the first universities.

Prior to that time, memory was the written record. Older people were revered because their memories were the unwritten collections of literature. Students can discuss the cultures that revere age. Medieval stories could start from any point; there was no plot structure.

Stories were often performed or sung as a form of entertainment. Troubadours and jongleurs would travel from town to town and perform ballads and stories. “Jongleurs were professional storytellers and entertainers in France from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries” (“World History”). Jongleurs brought poetry and music to an audience that might not have experienced literature and music. “They also helped lay the foundation for the later revival of European dramatic theater” (“World History”). They would sing songs, tell stories, recite poetry and sometimes perform acrobatic acts. Minstrels could play a musical instrument and troubadours often wrote their own music. Many of the songs were about love and some were about King Arthur. Students may make a comparison to musical acts today that travel from city to city on tour.

Medieval storytellers can remember quotes, but they can change it as they retell the story. A good storyteller will adjust to his or her audience. Local folk tradition would be passed on to future generations. Escapism was part of tradition in oral history. Storytellers used alliterative passages. The poems would be constructed in layers to be interpreted. The audience of the oral stories, poems and songs were usually ordinary people.

Four Levels of Reading: Literal, Allegorical, Moral, and Anagogical

The people of the medieval time period thought in symbols and metaphors. Interpretation of stories could be divided into four levels, depending on the ability and desire of the interpreter. The literal level is just that. Events are presented as they happen; they are not interpreted. On the allegorical level, the reader interprets what the story means. They often look for a moral: the lesson the visions teach. Anagogical interpretation is spiritual allegory on a theological level.

Sermons were often created to be interpreted on multiple levels, depending on the ability and intellect of the audience. The population was literate and educators were instructed by St. Gregory the Great to teach according to the level of understanding of the audience. The meaning was not obvious, only the literati knew about that. Sermons addressed all levels and they were brief; they were meant to be read over and over because there is a new discovery each time. The trend of thinking in the twelfth century was to move away from group thinking to a discovery of the individual. The focus was on the inner world and inner development. The nobles were educated and intellectual.

Short stories were meant to be interpreted on several levels, as in the parables of the New Testament. . They were also structured differently in that the story can be read from any part, just open and read. There is no chronological order. For comparison, there are some contemporary stories that have no plot structure that students may be familiar with, such as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. Students may not be familiar with this structure. This may be a good time to remind the students that in the twelfth century Chretien de Troyes used the novel structure that students recognize.

Literary Terms and Vocabulary

Literary terms and vocabulary can be introduced daily rather than all at once. It is an opportunity to take notes and to process a little at a time. Concepts, such as allusion and oral formula theory can be taught by example. Students can learn about glossing and, at the same time, hone their skills at summarization. Romance can be taught in this unit with Chretien and Marie, then reintroduced during the eighteenth century romantic time period and the Victorian time period when the Middle Ages were idealized. Arthurian romance can be taught in the fall with this curriculum unit, then re-taught in the spring with the Victorian unit, since the nineteenth century experienced a revival and romanticism of Camelot, King Arthur, and chivalry. Chretien de Troyes uses internal dialogue in his stories. Students can identify and try to write internal dialogue. The Four Levels of Reading may be a challenge even for the advanced students. Interpretation of a story on the literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical levels can be applied to any literature during the school year. Students can learn that there is not only one way to interpret something. Oral formula theory can be taught during the medieval unit as well as when poetry or speeches are taught. The novel structure is a relevant lesson since Chretien de Troyes was the first to use it in his romances.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: Life during the Middle Ages

Objective

Teach about life during the Middle Ages in an engaging fun activity in order to spark the students' interest in this time period.

Prior Knowledge

None

Materials

- Coloring sheets and crayons, markers or colored pencils
- Color pictures of Medieval life from books, such as *Medieval Life* and the *Atlas of the Medieval World*
- Pictures of tapestries or a facsimile of a tapestry
- A movie that portrays medieval life Show the class examples of artwork from the Middle Ages. Discuss. Students maybe interested to know that tapestries not only beautified the walls, they acted like insulation to ward off the cold on the castle walls. Show a movie that portrays medieval life, such as *The Lion in Winter*.
- Students can research, plan and execute a medieval feast by wearing clothing that represents the time period and cooking food from recipes.
- Students can design their own crest or tartan or create a crest to represent the class.

Lesson Plan Two: Four Levels of Reading

Objective

Teach that people thought differently and constructed their stories differently in the middle ages. Application of knowledge about interpreting a story on the literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical levels.

Prior Knowledge

A lesson on the four levels of reading and a familiarity with the story the student is to interpret.

Materials

A short story, preferably a medieval story

The student interprets one story on all four levels. If the class is familiar with the story, the student can give a class presentation and explain his analyses. This works well as a group project. Divide the class into groups of four and each student translates the story a different way. Each group can be given a different story, such as the *Lais of Marie de France* or *Chretien de Troyes*. The groups can present their interpretations in front of the class, which covers the requirement to speak in class. Each student chooses a different level of interpretation. This can be done for four different stories, allowing each student to use each of the levels of interpretation.

Lesson Plan Three: Comparison of Stories from a Female and Male Point of View

Objective

Teach that similar stories can be told from different perspectives.

Prior Knowledge

Students need to read the selected stories prior to this lesson.

Materials

The stories that are to be compared; for example, the *Lais of Marie de France* and *Chretien de Troyes*.

The students can create a chart and compare or write a comparison essay. The teacher can divide the room into two “teams” or groups and each can present their interpretations of the stories. The class will then make comparisons.

The class can divide into two groups: one for women and one for men. Students can either choose which side to support or they can be divided by gender. Each side has to convince the other that its viewpoint is the better of the two. This also invites the opportunity to explore the theme of man versus woman in several texts.

CONCLUSION

The topic of my curriculum unit, the French medieval authors, Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes, may be restrictive as far as to the age level of the students; however, the teacher can modify and simplify to use it to meet his or her specific class’s needs. Exploring the way that people thought in medieval times and the perspective of the King Arthur stories, *lais* and romances from the French authors, Marie de France and Chretien de Troyes, intrigued me as a curriculum unit. Most high school students read the British Arthurian legends. I consider this curriculum unit a success if it helps students to learn about life during the middle ages and to realize that there are different ways to think and to interpret information, the Middle Ages were not dark and ignorant times, women were important contributors to life and literature, and the novel format as we know it was created by a French author in the twelfth century, Chretien de Troyes.

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