

The Middle Ages through the Study of Two Pieces of Literature

Juan P. Lodeiro
Lee High School

INTRODUCTION

The period circumscribed between the years 500 and 1500 A.D. is often referred to as “the dark ages.” During these thousand years, however, talented men and women paved the way for the Italian Renaissance with their remarkable works of art, literature, and science. With this unit, and through the reading and analysis of selections from both the 12th century *Lais of Marie de France* and the 14th century *Canterbury Tales*, I intend to portray the ideas, morals, conflicts, and contradictions of two distinctly different periods of this usually underrated period in history, the first before and the second after the c. 1350 Black Death.

This unit is meant to be applied to any of the four high school grades. However, and since I mostly teach ninth graders, my focus will be on this specific student population and their academic needs as well as their learning development characteristics. As teachers, we are faced everyday with at least one of the following flagellums from the part of our students: apathy, lack of internal motivation, and mostly boredom. Through the teaching of this unit, I hope to open the minds of my learners to a different world, a world of everyday people who experienced similar conflicts to the ones we endure today, but in a world almost one thousand years old. In this time-traveling experience through literature, I will expect my students to reach an extensive comprehension of the medieval world through the eyes of their people and to approach its characters in a personal way, always keeping an eye on the historical context.

If knowing about our past lets us understand our role in the present and become responsible citizens, it should be every teacher’s goal to educate his or her students in the world’s culture. Literature being one of culture’s most perfect realizations, it seems to be the logical means to introduce other subject matter that stems from it or influenced it. *The Lais of Marie de France* and *The Canterbury Tales* depict the Medieval world in two different dimensions: pre- and post-Black Death respectively. The enormous repercussions of the pestilence of c. 1350 in all the fields of life, (economy, society, politics, beliefs, and so forth), are well-worth analyzing and are bound to initiate critical thinking on the parts of students as well as reflections on our present world.

UNIT BACKGROUND

Overview of the Two Pieces of Literature

The Lais of Marie de France

Very little is known about the origins of Marie de France. For various reasons, it is thought that the author was a woman named Marie who also wrote a rhymed collection of Aesop’s Fables (or rather of an expanded medieval version of these fables), and one longer poem translated from Latin, the *Purgatory of St. Patrick*. It is believed that “she was a woman of courtly connections; her poems are clearly directed to that audience. Yet since no records have been found indicating that she was married or owned property, she probably had taken vows and lived in a convent, as was customary for unmarried women of rank” (Marie de France, *Fables* 5). The *lais* were dedicated to a king who is usually thought to be Henry II of England, but his son, Henri au Court

Mantel, has also been proposed as an alternative choice. The works of Marie de France are significant not only because she is a female author in an age when educated women existed only among some of the aristocracy, but also because her stories of romance and adventure were written in the vernacular (French), instead of Latin.

The Lais of Marie de France were composed in the second half of the twelfth century. They are rich in place names, and in reading them students will find themselves transported to medieval Europe. In addition to realistic geographical settings, the *lais* provide an insight into the feudal and courtly society of Marie's days. They describe an idyllic world, where desires are frequently focused on the love of a noble woman, who, regardless of her marital status, is usually unable to control her own fate. The *lais* mostly deal with these relationships "between men and women, more specifically between knights and ladies of high social status" (Marie de France, *Lais* 18). In spite of this, other issues arise from the *lais*. A strong concern for judicial reform was brought to England by the Normans, and Marie felt very close to these preoccupations as they are reflected in some of her stories. Still, the most salient trait of her work is the vision that she delivers on contemporary feudal life (chivalry, marriage, love, tournaments, hunting and war), and social structure. Students will establish an intimate connection with the characters in Marie's work since they "spar with one another in spirited, realistic dialogue; the action is strongly visualized and the setting vividly suggested by a few words" (Marie de France, *Fables* 10). The use of symbolic elements throughout her stories is also characteristic of *The Lais of Marie de France*. Students will be required to locate and analyze the objects that acquire a symbolic importance in the stories. Finally, the *lais* will serve to introduce the following reading.

Thomas Warton (Marechal 46), an 18th century scholar, studied *The Lais of Marie de France* as a source of inspiration for our next author, Geoffrey Chaucer. In his writings, Warton focuses on the parallels between Chaucer's work and several *lais*. An extension to the activities suggested for this unit could perfectly include a more thorough comparison of the two pieces of literature in the light of the analysis of this and other scholars.

The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* between 1387 and 1400. Often referred to as the "father of modern English," Chaucer enjoyed being recognized as a writer by his contemporaries, a rare distinction in his times. "Chaucer was the first English poet to demonstrate the flexibility of his own language and to elevate it as a serious medium in an era when the language of the court and officialdom was still French, and when Latin continued to be regarded as high and learned" (Ashton 139). Chaucer became familiar with French and especially Italian literature during his trips to these countries. Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Dante had the biggest impact in his work. Marie de France, with her *lais* in French, is also thought to have been influential in his work. Students will be encouraged to establish stylistic and thematic connections between the two texts. "Chaucer's audience is generally assumed to have been a courtly and sophisticated one, composed of many different types of people including the aristocratic as well as a more bourgeois class, and comprising both sexes" (Ashton 151). *The Canterbury Tales* are the stories of a group of thirty people who traveled as pilgrims to Canterbury. The pilgrims, who represented "a broad cross-section of medieval society from the nobility, through the servitors in the feudal structure and the different echelons of the Church hierarchy, to the growing numbers of independent, self-employed tradesmen and women" (Wynne-Davies in *The Tales of the Clerk* 4), told stories to each other to kill time while they traveled to Canterbury. Chaucer's tales will let the students look into the pilgrimage phenomenon as acts of worship, together with the use of satire as means of criticizing society. As with the *lais*, the Normans' influence on English language and society will be outlined.

Chaucer's England was very different from Marie's. In his time there were many manifestations of rebellion against the old order of things. Chaucer's countrymen began thinking of themselves as Englishmen. The growth of manufacturing and commerce gave rise to a middle class that speeded the end of the feudal system. People demanded more voice in the affairs of their government, and in the midst of this social ferment, England was three times swept by the Black Plague that reduced its population by one half. In fact, Chaucer and his parents were fortunate to escape infection when the plague hit England in 1348.

More politically concerned than the *lais*, *The Canterbury Tales* deal with a wide range of topics, some of them identical to those in Marie's stories. Love, relationships between men and women, the role of the church, faith, social structure, feudalism, and honor are among some of the most prominent themes in the tales. The social tensions explored by Chaucer, such as the socio-economic basis of marriage and male's dominant role supported by the Church and its teaching, as well as the role of a Church that permeated every aspect of medieval life, are some of the critical themes that students will be exposed to.

Structurally speaking, the tales are linear, mirroring somehow the road to Canterbury. Nevertheless, there is much more going on during the pilgrimage than just a succession of tales. "When Chaucer places tales together, he does so for more than casual reasons. The ideas of the pilgrimage and the story-competition provide a logic for one story to succeed another" (Cooper 17). The order in which Chaucer placed the tales suggest a subtle arrangements that carries a message about the society of the time and human nature that students will be encouraged to discover during the study of the text.

Medieval Europe

General Considerations

Traditionally, the Middle Ages have been seen as a time of darkness, regression, and loss of classical values. The general belief that was accepted for generations was that of an era characterized by intellectual, artistic, and literary manifestations of little or no importance. Fortunately, this trend has dissipated and now we acknowledge the Middle Ages, or at least the 12th century, as the true first Renaissance.

Medieval Culture

Medieval intellectuals were very well acquainted with the great Roman writers, such as Seneca, Cicero, and Ovid. At the same time, the influence of Greek culture became increasingly important and in the 12th century. Aristotle's writings were fully translated. This served as a springboard for the work of Christian thinkers who would attempt the reconciliation of faith and reason.

The Middle Ages produced brilliant minds. Alcuin (730 – 804) was a prominent educator; one of the founders of the medieval methods of teaching. Saint Anselm (1050 – 1120) reaffirmed realism and helped consolidate the scholastic method. Abelard (1079 – 1142), a passionate and active teacher, had a great influence in medieval thinking. Abelard's fame lies in the fact that he tried, more decisively than anyone before him, to fix the scholastic philosophy, giving a rational expression to the received ecclesiastical doctrine.

Science

The highest achievements of medieval science took place in the last centuries of the period and mostly in universities. In astronomy, knowledge was still elementary. The geocentric theory was accepted. However, the improvements in the methods of observation and study of the stars would pave the way to the great discoveries of the following centuries. In chemistry, the work of alchemists provided new data that would be the base for future experimentations. In physics, the

invention of eyeglasses to correct human vision was the most notable achievement. This discovery would later be applied to astronomy, in the form of the telescope. In mathematics, some of the greatest advancements in medieval knowledge took place. This happened mostly due to the important influence that Arabic culture had at the time. Europeans had kept the old Roman numeration which lacked the notion of the number zero. Thanks to the Islamic influence, Leonardo Fibonacci presented, in the last years of the Middle Ages, the decimal system. Improvements in the field of medicine also took place, especially in the University of Salerno. The Islamic influence in this matter was of great value, mainly in surgery and the creation of hospitals.

Universities

The university, as we know it today, is a Medieval creation. Its origin dates back to the times of the episcopal schools, which were located next to the cathedrals. With time, they acquired independence, and by the 12th century they became the true holders of the knowledge of the time. The development of universities was closely connected to the economic, social, and political transformations that occurred during these years.

Artistic Manifestations

In literature, the Middle Ages signified the beginning of vernacular productions. A new genre was created: troubadour poetry, which began in Southern France and made reference to the refinement in taste and customs of this period. Romances, which were inspired by topics such as Troy, the adventures of King Arthur, the love of Tristan and Isolde, and written in vernacular languages, are also characteristic of the period.

Gothic art and architecture are probably the most recognizable styles of medieval art. Architecture, which reached its paramount expressions in Gothic churches, is characterized by pointed arches, flying buttresses, swooping lines, and stained glass. In painting, the change to the new style became noticeable around a century after the first of the cathedrals rose. The most visible feature of the art of the Gothic period is its increased naturalism. This characteristic simultaneously appeared in the work of Italian artists in the late 13th century, and it became the prevalent painting style throughout Europe until the end of the 15th century.

The Black Death

Origins of the Black Death

In the early 1330s an outbreak of deadly bubonic plague began in China. The bubonic plague was the most commonly seen form of the Black Death. The mortality rate could rise up to 75%. The term 'bubonic' refers to the characteristic bubo or enlarged lymphatic gland, one of the most visible symptoms of the disease. Victims were subject to headaches, nausea, aching joints, fever of 101 to 105 degrees, vomiting, and a general feeling of illness. Symptoms took from one to seven days to appear. The plague affected rodents, but fleas could transmit the disease to people. Once people were infected, they infected others very rapidly. The disease caused spots on the skin that were red at first and then turned black. Since China was one of the busiest of the world's trading nations, it was only a matter of time before the outbreak of plague in China spread to western Asia and Europe. In October of 1347, several Italian merchant ships returned from a trip to the Black Sea. When the ships docked in Sicily, many of those on board were already dying of plague. Within days the disease spread to the city and the surrounding countryside. The disease struck and killed people with terrible speed. The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio lived through the plague as it ravaged the city of Florence in 1348. The experience inspired him to write *The Decameron*, a story of seven men and three women who escaped the disease by fleeing to a villa outside the city. In his introduction to the fictional portion of his book, Boccaccio gives a graphic description of the effects of the epidemic on his city. By August 1349, the plague had spread as

far north as England, where people called it "The Black Death" because of the black spots it produced on the skin. The plague traveled on trade routes and with caravans. Its path of death was generally from south to north and east to west passing through Italy, France, England, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Finland, and eventually reaching Greenland.

In winter the disease seemed to disappear, but only because fleas, which were helping to carry it from person to person, were dormant then. Each spring, the plague struck again, killing new victims. After five years, one-third of Europe's population had died from the Black Death. Even when the worst was over, smaller outbreaks continued, not just for years, but for centuries. The survivors lived in constant fear of the plague's return, and the disease did not disappear until the 1600s. The very social, economic, and political structure of Europe was forever altered.

Effects on the Economy

The economy was probably one of the aspects of Medieval life that was changed the most by the plague. The biggest problem that the Black Death caused, in what became a domino-effect reaction, was that valuable artisan workers disappeared when large numbers of the working class died. Therefore, those who had skills became more valuable and powerful. The social structure began to change. The peasants and artisans demanded higher wages. Serfs seeking liberation from tilling their lord's land were told by decree and statute to return to their master's duties. Serfs began to leave their land and the planting of crops. Unattended crops and stray animals died of starvation because of the lack of care. Many domesticated animals began to roam the forest. Farming communities became rare. People left rural areas and migrated to cities for higher wages. The lack of sufficient law enforcement personnel promoted lawlessness. All these factors led workers to demand higher wages, but landlords refused those demands. By the end of the 14th century peasant revolts broke out in England, France, Belgium, and Italy. The demand for agricultural workers gave survivors a new bargaining power. Workers formerly bound to the land could now travel and demand higher wages for their services. The economic structure of land-based wealth shifted. Portable wealth in the form of money, skills, and services emerged. Small towns and cities grew while large estates and manors began to collapse.

In 1381, Chaucer's London was the main focus of the so-called "Peasants' Revolt." This complex event was the climax of a number of different social processes in which not all the people involved were peasants. It certainly reflected a widespread wish for freedom from older kinds of administrative control. Since so many villagers had died in the Black Death, laborers' wages had risen and the Parliament had tried several times to pass laws reducing farm workers' wages. The imposition of new taxes increased resentment. In June 1381, rebels from Kent reached London, claiming they wanted to obtain justice from King Richard II, whom they idolized. They plundered the city, burning John of Gaunt's Savoy Palace in revenge for his role in making the new taxes. They dragged a group of Flemish immigrants from a church and massacred them for taking work from Londoners. Finally, they entered the Tower of London and murdered the archbishop of Canterbury. King Richard agreed to meet the rebels' leaders at Smithfield and showed himself to be understanding. Then, while they were talking, the mayor of London suddenly struck down Wat Tyler, the main leader of the revolt, and in the confusion the other main figures were arrested. Many were later executed. There is no indication that Chaucer played any role in these events, although he does mention the leader from Essex, Jack Straw, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Some of the rebels were idealists motivated by a desire for more and better rights, but Chaucer probably saw them as a lawless mob.

Effects on Society

The Black Death killed a massive portion of Europe's population. The plague was more effective when it attacked weakened people, and Europe at the time was already weakened by

exhaustion of the soil due to poor farming and the introduction of more sheep which reduced the land available for grain.

Fleas infected with the Bubonic Plague would jump from rats to travelers, killing millions and infesting the continent with immeasurable fear. Normal people were tormented by the threat of death, causing them to change their views on leisure, work, and art.

Many believed that the disease was transmitted through the air, probably because the smell from the dead and dying was so terrible. Therefore, the living turned to scents to ward off the deadly vapors. People burned all types of incense: juniper, laurel, pine, beech, lemon leaves, rosemary, camphor, and sulfur. Others had handkerchiefs dipped in aromatic oils to cover their faces when going out. Another remedy was the cure of sound. Towns rang church bells to drive the plague away. Other towns fired cannons. There were plenty of talismans, charms, and spells that could be purchased from the local wise woman to avoid contracting the plague.

Some thought that a moderate life and the avoidance of all superfluity would preserve them from the epidemic. They formed small communities, living entirely isolated from everybody else. They shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick, eating the finest food and drinking the best wine very temperately, avoiding all excess, allowing no news or discussion of death and sickness, and passing the time in music and other inspiring pleasures. Others thought just the opposite. They thought the sure cure for the plague was to drink and be happy, to go about singing and amusing themselves, satisfying every appetite they could, laughing at what happened. They put their words into practice, spent day and night going from tavern to tavern, drinking without moderation. Frequently, citizens avoided each other; hardly any neighbor troubled about others, relatives seldom visited. The whole social structure was affected by the plague, reaching even the family unit.

A multitude of sick men and women were left without any care, except from the charity of friends or of servants, though not many of these could be had even for high wages. Most of them did little more than bring the sick what they asked for or watch over them when they were dying. And very often these servants lost their lives and their earnings in the process.

Not only were the children affected physically, but also mentally by this scenario. Exposure to public nudity, craziness, and, naturally, abundant death was experienced prematurely. The disease of family members left children facing death and pain at an early age. Parents even abandoned their children, leaving them on the streets. Children were especially unlucky if they were female. Baby girls would be left to die because parents would prefer male children that could carry on the family name. Soon after the last eruption of the Black Death, the views on children changed. Although carrying on the family name was still considered important, the birth rate dropped. Children were considered "not worth the trouble" to raise. It took four hundred years before Europe's population equaled the pre-Black Death figures. The psychological impact of such traumatic experiences surely was profound.

Effects on the Church

The disease took its toll on the church as well. People throughout Christendom had prayed devoutly for deliverance from the plague. They wondered why their prayers had not been answered. A new period of political turmoil and philosophical questioning lay ahead. By the late fourteenth century, the Catholic Church, which governed England, Ireland, and the entire continent of Europe, had become extremely wealthy. The cathedrals that grew up around shrines to saints' relics were incredibly expensive to build, and the amount of gold that went into decorating them and equipping them with candlesticks and reliquaries was immeasurable. In a century of disease, plague, famine, and scarce labor, the sight of a church ornamented with unused gold seemed unfair to some people, and the Church's preaching against greed suddenly

seemed hypocritical, considering its great displays of material wealth. Distaste for the excesses of the Church triggered stories and anecdotes about greedy, irreligious churchmen who accepted bribes, bribed others, and indulged themselves sensually and gastronomically, while ignoring the pain and poverty at their doors. Some of Chaucer's tales reflect this new way of feeling towards the church as well as a general skepticism toward and questioning of nearly every aspect of Medieval culture before the Black Death. Such changes in the nature of Medieval life are clearly reflected in a comparison of the society depicted in the *Lais of Marie de France* to that depicted in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Logistics

Students first will be given the historical background necessary to better understand the texts, with a special emphasis on the Black Death. This will be done in cooperation with the Social Studies teacher. *The Lais of Marie de France* will then be introduced. As we read and analyze some of the *lais*, students will be encouraged to establish connections between the historical information studied earlier in the unit, and the text itself. Later, students will read and analyze a selection of *The Canterbury Tales*, and they will be asked to compare and contrast the context, tone, and themes in both. This unit will be strongly TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skill)-oriented, and while studying both texts, students will have the opportunity to review already learned literary terms and to practice reading strategies, as well as to learn new ones. Most importantly, learners will be able to compare and contrast the *lais* to the *tales* from the perspective of how the Black Death transformed the Medieval world.

Students will choose a particular character from *The Canterbury Tales* and will develop a character analysis that will culminate with the elaboration of a fictional contemporary counterpart. Learners will gain a deep understanding of human nature, its miseries and joys, through the critical analysis, comparison and contrast of *The Lais of Marie de France* and *The Canterbury Tales*. The skills learned in this unit should transcend the merely academic and transfer to the students' daily lives. Being able to give their lives a historical perspective, understanding how our culture, in its various forms, is the result of the ideas and works of our ancestors, and analyzing the temporal and universal themes of literature depicted in both books will ensure the practical and personal profit of this unit.

The lessons for this thematic unit should be developed in a three-week period (double block classes, meeting daily). Half of the first week will be devoted to building schema in order to best serve the objectives of the unit. These will be in accordance to the mandated Texas Essential Knowledge and Skill (TEKS) objectives. The focus will be mainly historical and the aim will be to open the minds of students to the different possibilities of the medieval world. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the coordination with other subjects, especially with World History or Social Studies, is pivotal in creating a more holistic and cross-curricular learning experience. During the development of the unit, students could produce a piece of poetry (mimic writing), with a medieval theme, recognize and analyze literary elements included in the TEKS (plot, theme, mood, tone, irony, foreshadowing, climax, simile, metaphor, personification, etc.), and work on a project where they would produce a contemporary character parallel to one from *The Canterbury Tales*, and they will compare and contrast both pieces of text from a literary and historical perspective.

Strategies

I will use a variety of very effective strategies that were first introduced to me in 2004 while training for a First Things First literacy program. This program was based on the constant

application of four different strategies, namely cloze, make and break, inductive method, and read alouds.

Cloze Strategy

The cloze strategy consists of a passage, which in this unit will be one of the *lais* or part of a *tale*, containing several blank spaces for students to fill in with one word only. There are several ways to develop cloze activities: the one that required the highest level of thinking is a blank space without any type of clues. Options for provided clues include different choices of word, (with or without distracters), at the bottom of the page, three different choices for each space, the first letter for each blank word, or the amount of letters for each missing word. When administering cloze activities, the student must know the instructional goal for the activity, and explicit modeling of the strategies that you want students to use should be given. Students should always read the passage all the way through first, so as to create a context for the missing words. Learners must fill in the easy blanks first, and be reminded to always reread the whole passage at the end. There are several strategies utilized while working with cloze activities: holding meaning -linking thoughts and ideas (semantics), teaching form and structure (syntax), the use of context clues, vocabulary usage, reading in segments rather than word by word, predicting and summarizing skills, and monitoring strategies. During the reading of the other *lais* and tales, students should be able to transfer the strategies they use doing cloze activities.

Considering the level of your students, the words to be deleted from the original text and turned into blanks should vary. For an English language learners class, the words chosen could be, for instance, in the case of *The Lay of the Nightingale*, and leaving the first paragraph as it is (the first couple of lines should not be used for the cloze so as to always provide some previous context for the student): *stands, citizens, great, other, time, man, and spent* (taken from the modern English translation of *The Lays of Marie de France*). Even though these words seem simple, the real challenge will be for students to explain the process why they chose such terms. This cloze could also come with a word bank, with or without distracters, or with three choices per blank.

Make-and-Breaks

Make-and-Breaks consist of a passage divided into different units or items, which can be either paragraphs or any other possible subdivision of the whole. Learners are to put the items back together in the order that they originally have. Students can be asked to cut up the pieces of the passage (scissors provided), or the teacher can already have the items cut and ready to be distributed. The distribution can be done all at one time or piece by piece. Students should always scan all the pieces before reassembling the passage. The instructor should always model (performing think aloud), the process of reassembling. The most salient strategy utilized by students to meet the goal of make-and-breaks is sequencing. Other strategies include holding meaning (linking thoughts and ideas), understanding form and structure, reading in segments rather than word by word, predicting, and summarizing.

Depending on the level of maturity of the students, the choice of the *lais* to be taught may vary, since most of them contain some sort of sexual connotation. You may as well decide to work only with a section of the text. As an example I would choose *The Lay of the Honeysuckle* because of its short length and clear sequential narrative. Students should be given a handout with at least twenty numbered passages of the lay randomly ordered. Students should read the items and then begin the reassembling process, with the goal of finding the original sequence of the lay. Learners should also be asked to justify a varying number of sequences, depending on their level and time allotted. Therefore, they should be able to explain their thinking process orally or by writing.

Inductive Method

The inductive process consists of four different phases. All of them revolve around the use of a Data Set: a collection of passages, usually numbered, that is thematically or contextually related. In the first phase, learners must examine the Data Set by reading it and later discussing with their classmates. Students must become comfortable with the information they will be using. The second phase is pivotal in the formation of concept. At the core of the inductive process is the concept of grouping. Students must group or classify the different passages in the Data Set. These groups can be labeled and then all the items must be categorized. In the next phase, students build and test hypothesis about relationships and explore these to build generalizations. Interpreting, inferring, and generalizing are the heart of this phase. Finally, in phase four, students build and test hypothesis, search for other data to expand their already existing Data Set, and apply their classification to extend their learning. Depending on the level of the students, the different categories may be provided by the teacher, (especially recommended for English language learners).

An example of this method could be a Theme Data Set which would include passages from different tales with clear thematic value, and that students would have to classify among the categories of *corruption of the church* (excerpts from the Monk and the Prioress' tales), *courtly love* (excerpts from the Knight and the Prioress' tales), *the importance of company* (excerpts from the Knight and the Plowman's tale), and any other that would be represented in more than one tale. Other Data Sets could refer to literary resources used by the author, such as irony or figurative language, depending on the objective of the lesson. All of these items should be mixed and numbered on a handout that students would first read thoroughly to later elaborate categories and then proceed to classify the items.

Read Alouds

When performing read alouds, the teacher reads a passage from the text and performs think-aloud during or after the reading. The reading is usually followed by an activity in which the student is engaged in discussing the text or responding to a given prompt. Read alouds provide students with a proficient model for both intonation and pronunciation. These elements are fundamental in creating the automaticity necessary for any type of high-level reading. This technique is also effective to work with the content of the piece and with the writing technique and devices employed.

An example of this technique could be a read aloud of any powerful passage from *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, arguably the most fully realized character in *The Canterbury Tales*. When working, for instance, on characterization, student should, after a brief Read Aloud, brainstorm words that describe the Wife of Bath and then share them with the class prompting a discussion.

LESSON PLANS

Activity One

Naturally, this first activity will be introductory. The objective is to either activate schema or create a historical context for the pieces of literature that will be studied. I would begin the unit by working on an anticipation guide. Students would receive a handout containing several statements with facts about the Middle Ages, the Black Death and its effects on the medieval world. Students would have to say if the statements are true or false. After that, a poll would be conducted by the teacher to register students' previous knowledge and guesses on the topic. Following this, students would be given a handout containing a text that would summarize the political, economic, social, and religious structures of the Middle Ages and how they were affected by the plague. Finally, students would review their anticipation guide to evaluate and correct their previous knowledge. This lesson should be carried out regardless of whether the

Social Studies teacher has taught the Middle Ages or not. If that is the case, it will naturally benefit the unit, but even then, and knowing how volatile the memory of our students usually is, this lesson should be beneficial. An extension to this activity could be to play a hands-on activity where each student would be assigned a role in medieval Europe and then students would be asked to step aside when their role/name is raffled until half of the class has left their seats and moved to one corner of the classroom. Those students would represent the population killed by the Black Death. After that, students should be asked to imagine what they would do to survive in a world where half of the population, with their skills and occupations was to vanish in a few years.

Activity Two

This activity will be a Word Splash. The objective will be to introduce new vocabulary from the pieces of literature to be studied and to work with connotation and denotation. A list of words can be posted on the overhead projector or given to students on paper. Depending on the time allotted, the level of your students, and the words chosen, students can perform structural analysis to figure out the meaning of the words, or can discuss them with peers to predict what they might mean. A more direct approach, and one that would allow the practice of dictionary skills, would be to look up the words in the dictionary. Once students have found or figured out the denotation of a term, they should write it on a three-column chart, in which the first column would be for the words, the second one for the denotation, and the last one for the connotation of that word. Depending on the level of your students, you may require them to provide a wordy definition for the connotation box of each word, or just to state if the word has a positive, negative, or neutral connotation. Finally, the teacher should debrief students' work by filling out a chart on the overhead projector so as to reach a common ground at the time of beginning the reading.

Activity Three

At this point, you could introduce students to the first text, *The Lais of Marie de France* by performing a read aloud of several selected passages. The objective of this activity is to practice reading strategies, such as predict and connect, pronunciation, intonation, and to promote high-level-thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Each passage should be given to students in paper and should be accompanied by at least two questions that, especially at this point of the unit, should stress the tone of the passages and the themes dealt with. If the passages are from the same lay, students could predict what will happen in it. They can also fill out a KWL chart, where they would write what they know about the lay (K column - based on what they have read in the Read Alouds and their previous knowledge of the Middle Ages), and what they want to know (W column – questions that reflect their natural curiosity for knowing more based on what they already know). The last column (L column), is left empty until students have finish reading the entire lay and is meant to reflect what students have learned about the topic. An extension to this activity could include asking students to formulate literal and interpretive questions for one or some of the Read Alouds. When working with higher-level learners, and if a lesson on Bloom's Taxonomy was taught previously, students can be required to formulate a certain type of questions in correspondence with Bloom's classification.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

- Ashton, Gail. *Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales*. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.
A detailed analysis of the Miller, the Nun's Priest, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner, together with a study of Chaucer's style and narrative skills. It's a useful tool to fully prepare for this unit and to expand its potential.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Tales of the Clerk and the Wife of Bath*. Ed. Marion Wybbe-Davies. London, England: Routledge English Texts, 1992.
Analysis of the stories named in the title accompanied with very informative historical comments that provide the teacher with invaluable contextual information.
- Cooper, Helen. *Oxford Guides to Chaucer. The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford, England: Oxford UP, 1996.
Comprehensive guide to the tales, with useful commentaries on all aspects of the work. It provides interpretations with information on such matters as sources, dating, themes, structure, style, and generic relations.
- Marechal, Chantal. *The Reception and Transmission of the Works of Marie de France, 1774 – 1974*. Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003.
A thorough study of the *lais*, ideal to deepen the understanding of the work and better teach the unit.
- Marie de France. *Marie de France. Fables*. ed. and trans. Harriet Spiegel. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1994.
English and French version of the *lais* preceded by an introduction that sheds light on the historical origins of the text.
- . *Marie de France. Lais*. Ed. Alfred Ewert. Bristol, England: Bristol Classical Press, 1995.
The *lais* in this book are in French only, so it could be useful as a curiosity, if you want to show your students how the *lais* were originally written. The introduction to the text contains information on the dating of the work, the identity of its writer, its themes, and other aspects that are well worth knowing to best cater for the students.

Supplemental Resources

- Baldwin, John W. *The Scholastic Culture of the Middle Ages, 1000 – 1300*. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1971.
A brief overview of medieval Europe's history, perfect to explain the vibrant culture existing before the Black Death.
- Bourgeois Richmond, Velma. *Chaucer as Children's Literature*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2004.
Book that examines Chaucer's tales that have been retold for children. Excellent resource to modify lessons according to the level of the students.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. London, England: Penguin Books, 2003.
A series of tales told by different pilgrims on their way to Canterbury.
- Clogan, Paul M., ed. *Medievalia et Humanistica. Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*. Denton, Texas: North Texas State University, 1974.
A series of reviews in all areas of medieval culture: literature, art, history, law, etc., that will be quite valuable when exposing the customs and beliefs of the time.
- Exploring Ancient World Cultures*. 1997. University of Evansville. 14 May 2005.
<<http://eawc.evansville.edu/mepage.htm>>.
Reliable source of general information about the Middle Ages. It includes articles on medieval literature and art.
- Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1343 – 1400)*. 1996. Anniina Jokinen. 12 Apr. 2005.
<<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/chaucer.htm>>
Site about the British author's life and works. It also contains a series of very insightful articles by professors and students.
- Gottfried, Robert. *The Black Death*. New York: Free Press, 1983.
A detailed history of the Black Death and its effects in Europe.
- Guilbert of Nogent. *A Monk's Confession. The Memoirs of Guilbert of Nogent*. Trans. Paul J. Archambault. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2004.
Memoirs of a medieval monk that convey the religious fervor as well as the anguishes and contradiction of medieval Europe. This book will contribute to a better understanding of the role of faith in the Middle Ages.

Marie de France. *Medieval Fables. Marie de France*. Trans. Jeanette Beer. New York, New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1983.

An illustrated selection of Marie's fables. I would recommend the use of the pictures with English language learners at the beginning level, where visual aids are most useful.

---. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Trans. Glyn S. Burgess. London, England: Penguin Books, 1999.

This paperback volume is a student-friendly choice, suitable for young people and the classroom.

The Name of the Rose. Dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud. Perf. Sean Connery, Michael Lonsdale, Christian Slater, and Andrew Birkin. 20th Century Fox, 1986.

Recommended movie to show students the typical medieval settings, customs, tools, etc.

Rosenwein, Barbara. *A Short History of the Middle Ages*. Calgary, Canada: Broadview Press, 2004.

A short history of the Middle Ages in two volumes. The second one is the most suitable for this unit since it covers the period between the years 900 and 1500.