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Last updated9 March 2020This detailed 60 page document has been designed to assist students and teachers in their thematic understanding of Chaucers The Wife of Baths Prologue and Tale.For each theme, detailed interpretations of the text are provided, along with accompanying quotations and line references to assist in a students exploration of that theme in an essay. This has proven beneficial for my A-Level students, by having them directly engage with Chaucers language and methods to help achieve A02.Due to the repetitive nature of the Wifes narrative, there will inevitably be some overlap with some of the themes. However, my students have found this beneficial as it has made some of the ideas easier to learn.Themes that are explored:MarriageAuthority / PowerGender / Gender RolesGentillesse / Social ClassMale / Female RelationshipsThe ChurchThe Wife as a CharacterStruggle for Power / MaistresTea paid licenceHow can I reuse this?Select overall rating(No rating)Your rating is required to reflect your happiness.Write a reviewUpdate existing reviewIt's good to leave some feedback.Something went wrong, please try again later.A fantastic resource!Empty reply does not make any sense for the end userReport this resourceLet us know if it violates our terms and conditions. Our customer service team will review your report and will be in touch. Chaucer portrays the Wife of Bath, also known as Alison, as an unique individual in the General Prologue. Alison is a very pretty woman with a bold, red face that signal[s] her temperament (Hallissy 42). Additionally, her bright red stockings, new shoes, handmade kerchiefs, large hat, and spurs on her shoes . . . flaunt her wealth and status. . . (Slover 244) and exemplify her constant need for attention. Chaucer also introduces Alisons sexuality by illustrating . . . gap-teeth, set widely. . . (GP 15), a characteristic viewed as very sexual during the fourteenth century. The Wife of Bath is proficient in cloth making as Chaucer explains, She better[s] those of Ypres and of Ghent (GP 15), though the most renowned cloth making capitals of Europe. Alison has also embarked on many previous pilgrimages to locations such as Rome and Jerusalem (GP 15). Her decision to join Chaucers pilgrimage is interesting because during the time . . . good women, especially widows, were advised to protect their virtue by staying at home (Hallisy 43). In addition to her income from her cloth making business, the Wife of Bath has ample resources to fund her pilgrimages through inheritances from her five late husbands, one from whom she most likely gained the cloth business. Having more than one husband was very rare during the fourteenth century as Most widows did not remarry, and were often left to fend for themselves (Slover 247). However, because Alison has wealth from previous marriages, she never has an issue after one of her husbands passes away. The roles of women in medieval society were very different for each woman based on her social class, but most took on the role of wife, widow, or mother (Slover 243). Womens lives were often shaped by inheritances from their families and husbands, but they often did not have input in whom they married (Johnston 739). Additionally, women were expected to marry very young because they had a natural duty to produce children for medieval men. Middle class women often stayed home and took care of the house, and many . . . kept busy with necessary crafts such as spinning, weaving, and embroidering (740). The Wife of Bath represents many of the roles that women during the fourteenth century had, but she is also an individual, who defies the norms of medieval women. She was married very young to her first husband without her consent, but she does not have any children. Additionally, cloth making is a craft that she has developed and in which she has superlative skill. Finally, the Wife of Baths most unique quality is her sexuality. She has had a total of five husbands, and combined with her. . . other company in youth (Chaucer, GP 15), she seems to know how to make men want her even in her old age. Chaucer creates a vivid image of Alison in the General Prologue, one which he continues to develop through the Wife of Baths Prologue and Tale.The Wife of Baths Prologue could be considered a tale in and of itself because of the sections sheer length and the amount of information revealed about Alison. She begins her Prologue by speaking of the difference between authority and experience, as well as about how . . . marriage is a misery and a woe(Chaucer, GP 258). However, as she begins to discuss her relationships with her husbands, the reader begins to wonder if . . . there are arguably belong to her husbands rather than herself (Rossignol 365). The Wife of Bath associates authority with men because during medieval England knowledge came from the Bible and other books written and read solely by men, specifically the clergy. Therefore, she believes that Authority allows men to control women through books. . . (Hallissy 106). However, she describes the way in which she uses sex and argumentation to control her husbands in order that she may . . . redefine[the] nature of authority (Hallissy 105).Alison tells the pilgrims that The three [husbands] that I call good were rich and old(Chaucer, WBP 263). During the Middle Ages in England, women did not have many choices for making money. Therefore, the Wife of Bath chose her first three husbands based on the wealth she had an opportunity to gain, because . . . widows gained legal autonomy and usually inherited one-third of the property (Phillips 96) of her deceased husband. Because they were already old and nearing the age of death, she could acquire a wealth and her authority quickly by marrying these men. Alison uses sex as a means to gain control over her husbands. Until her husband gave all of his land and money into her control, she withheld sex from him. By abusing her power of sex. . . the Wife of Baths only goal is to achieve dominance over her husband (Hallissy 113). She also uses the power of argumentation against her husbands. Alison accused her husbands of unlawful acts continuously so that they did not have an opportunity to voice their suspicions, and so that when the argument was over, the husbands were so exhausted that they did not have the energy to fight back. The Wife of Bath views. . . argumentation [as] a way of gaining power (Hallissy 115).The last part of the Wife of Baths Prologue is her detailed explanation of her fourth and fifth husbands. Both husbands were younger men because she could find the financial stability to marry someone younger, considering A younger, poorer, but more attractive husbands would be a luxury that only a well-heeled widow could afford (Hallissy 115). The fourth was a partner who was unfaithful to Alison, so she attempted to show her authority by trying to make him jealous. Before the fourth man even got his hand in her (Phillips 96), she had found another man. Did you like this? This is the first time in the poem that Alison is mentioned. This page Genevieve Roles is a Wife of Bath". (2021, March 29). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351917025. For that but now kan man se none elves mo, For now the grete charitee and prayers of lymytours and other hooly freres. That serchen every lond and every stream, As thikke as motes in some-bee, Blessyng halle, chambres, kichens, boures, Cities, burghes, castels, hye toures, Thropes, bernes, shippes, dayerwes This maketh that ther ben no fayeres. For ther as wont to walken was an elfe Ther walken now mo. No creature saugh he that bar lyf. Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf A foulur wyther may no man. . . But certainly, er he came fullylre, Vanysshed this daunce, he nyste where. No creature saugh he that bar lyf. Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf A foulur wyther may no man. . .Thenkth ow noble, as seith Valerius, Was thikke Loutus Hostilius, That out of poverte rove to heigh noblesse. Redeth Senek, and redeth eke Boece, Ther shul ye seen epres that it no drede is, T. . . The Wife of Baths Prologue and Tale represent the conflicting forces of authority versus experience, medieval misogyny versus feminine sexuality, and the irony that arises from a character who seemingly justifies sexist accusations while embracing her independence and choice. As a woman who has been married five times, the Wife of Bath stands in opposition to clerical ideology that idolizes virginity and actively marginalizes women. However, her rather outlandish and almost comedic characterization makes the intent of the text ambiguous. Chaucer conveys the complexity of the Wife of Baths character through the contrast between her empowerment of women and female sexuality, and the usage of antifeminist language and assertions that permeate the tale.One of the dominant principles The Wife argues against is the exaltation of virginity by the Church and society more broadly. In doing so she not only illustrates the functionality and necessity of wives, but also empowers women through the agency and sexual freedom they are given by marriage. Early in the text, the Wife of Bath refutes the history of women being treated unfairly by common Biblical stories and societal traditions in general, especially women who do not practice chastity.Lat hem be breed of pured whete seed,And lat us wives hote barly breedAnd wyf with barly bread, Mark telle canCure Lord Jese refreshed many a man.In swich estate as God hath cleped us lof perseverer: I nam nat precious. (149-154)[1]In this passage The Wife asserts that she does not envy virgins, despite the pedestal that may be placed on them. She says that, if virgins are pure wheat bread, then wives are barley: resultant and useful. She makes an allusion to the miracle of loaves and fishes, in which Jesus fed 5,000 people with loaves of bread and fish. Finally the Wife says that to her, the Queen of Heaven has called her to this date, and she will persevere because she is not fastidious. Chaucers use of the word persevere is one of the earliest usages of this word, and it supports the idea that the Wife is someone who has endured much and values her experience. This scene is interesting because it rejects attitudes that measure a womans goodness by her virginity. Furthermore, she argues that God has called upon her to assume this position, not of a virgin but of a wife. This presents the idea that marriage is not necessarily an obligatory sin but rather an honorable duty. Additionally, the idea that women can have influence and power beyond their maidenhood is rather empowering during this time. The passage sets up her character within the narrative as someone who values independence, strength, and female agency. However, not long after this scene, indeed within the Wifes tale are moments in which she appears to be repeating common antifeminist ideals.Under that colour hadde I many a mirthe.For al swich wit is given us in oure birthe:Deceite, weeping, spinning God hath yveTo women kindly whil they may live.And thus of oo thing I avaunte me:At ende I hadde the bot in ech degree (405-10)[2]In this section, the Wife of Bath explains the pretense by which she boasts joyfully. God has given her, and women in general, the powers of deception and dishonesty to help them survive. She asserts that At ende I hadde the bot in ech degree, meaning she is proud because she has frequently used trickery to get the better of her foes. Chaucers characterization of the Wife in this moment is ambiguous because she appears to be embracing misogynistic tropes of classic literature. The idea that women are deceitful, using their sexuality to trick men, is reminiscent of antifeminist narratives. However, the complexity of the Wifes character makes it unclear as to whether or not her analysis of women is to be read as sexist, or conversely, as empowering. She could very well be satirizing common stereotypes of women and thus exposing their superficiality. The idea that women are bestowed these characteristics whil they may live indicates that there is a sort of survival strategy in the Wife of Baths tale. The idea that women are given the power of deception and dishonesty to help them survive is a theme that modern readers may detect. The Wifes comments in these lines serves as another facet in the complexity of her character: she is both a liberated woman and beholden to a learned sexism of the time.Later on in the text, the Wife of Bath introduces her fifth marriage, a relationship that challenges her strength and fortitude in many ways. Nevertheless, she seems to persist, and creates a satisfying marriage from the violence she endures. One particularly conflicting scene is the fight, in which her husband beats her for tearing the pages out of his clerical book of wicked wives:That in our hire he fil bakward adoun.And up he sterte as doth a wood leoun,And with his fist he smoot me on the heed[that in the floor I lay as I were dead. (799-802)[3]The Wife of Baths interactions with her fifth husband seem to be much more entrenched in the visceral and physical aspects of love, rather than contract. He is the most violent, and he laughs as he reads to her from his book of wicked wives cruel and spiteful action. This sort of brutal tension culminates in the fight between her and her husband in which he beats her to the point where she goes deaf in one ear. She describes him as a wood leoun, which translates to a raging lion. This image is interesting because lions often carry a certain majestic, or perhaps more fittingly, authoritative message. Despite her husband being much younger than she, he appears to wield great authority in their marriage. The Wife goes on to say that he strikes her so hard upon the head that she falls to the ground as if she were dying. While in a way the Wife initiated the altercation by fearlessly tearing the pages out of her husbands book, it seems at this moment that she has fallen victim to his masculine authority. As a character with unique status among women who has had five marriagesThe Wife of Bath seems to be disgruntled by her ability to overcome traditional barriers of this period. Yet, at this moment, granted that it is read as deeply serious, she appears rather vulnerable. Her insistence on misogynistic views, represented by her ripping out the book pages, has led her to her current, nearly dead. This scene is then almost directly contradicted by the Wife asserting her power in the relationship, which adds to Chaucers complex characterization.As I have God, I shal the never smite. That I have miske, And wit of foomes, I litte him. And said, This yveus mysel am I. Now wol I speke. (811-16)[4]After her husband knocks her to the ground he seems to be genuinely worried that she has died. He even pleads with God that he may never smite her again, a word associated with rather violent religious imagery. She retaliates by striking him on the cheek and declaring that she has been avenged, and now she will die. In essence, the Wife is challenging the power dynamics of the previous scene by securing both the last word and the last punch. This scene is complex because it is unclear how Chaucer wants the reader to interpret the gravity of the violence and its implications. Is the tone entirely serious and the Wife is in fact weakened by the masculinity of her husband? Or is this another comical story in which she assumes an empowered yet outlandish role? The diction suggests that the latter question is present in some form. The Wifes final statement: Now wol I die: I may no longer speke is dramatic, and embellishes the scene as a sort of spectacle. However, there is an underlying darkness that derives from the horror of the scene. The Wife is lying nearly dead on the floor, struck so hard by this man she seems to love that she has gone deaf in one ear. Unlike previous stories The Wife has told, there is a harrowing aspect to this experience. And yet she emerges from the scene still carrying a sort of authority, and as she later attains, sovereignty.Chaucers The Wife of Bath is a consequential and complex tale that holds a unique place within the history of early English literature. To extol the tale as the progressive beginnings of feminist literature would be erroneous; however, the Wife can still exist as a powerful heroine within a story of misogyny. She rejects stereotypes about women and sexuality perpetrated by religious men with great consistency, the Wife of Bath has been all the land and money property she inherited from her previous husbands, but she very quickly repays them. That Jankin turns out to be a wife beater who will not allow her any of his desires, she has called her to this date, and she will persevere because she is not fastidious. Chaucers use of the Queen as a preser and preser readers question what she means to be a sovereign woman. The Wife of Bath is dually a target of the conventions she attempts to live above and a powerful ymbol of the agency women are granted when they are given control over their own lives. (11 Geoffrey Chaucer, The Wife of Baths Prologue and Tale, in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019), 241.[2] Geoffrey Chaucer, The Wife of Baths Prologue and Tale, in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019), 247.[3] Geoffrey Chaucer, The Wife of Baths Prologue and Tale, in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019), 256.[4] Geoffrey Chaucer, The Wife of Baths Prologue and Tale, in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019), 256. The Wife of Bath's Tale is a notable literary work by Geoffrey Chaucer. A complete discussion of this literary work is given, which will help you enhance your literary skills and prepare for the exam. Read the Main texts, Key info, Summary, Themes, Characters, Literary devices, Quotations, Notes, and various study materials of The Wife of Bath's Tale. Power and Sovereignty in RelationshipsA central theme of the tale is the struggle for power within relationships. The Wife of Bath, in both her prologue and tale, argues that women desire sovereignty over their husbands and lovers. This idea is embodied in the tales resolution, where the knight learns that true harmony in a relationship comes from granting his wife autonomy. The old crone transforms into a beautiful and loyal wife only after the knight gives her control. It suggests that mutual respect and shared power lead to a successful partnership. The theme reflects the Wife of Baths own belief in using her gifts to maintain power over her husbands. Power:Power is a dominant theme in The Wife of Baths Tale, as at the beginning of the story, men hold all power, which is represented by the knight's character. However, after raping the women, the knight is sentenced to die by the king until Queen Guinevere proposes different punishment. At this point, power is reversed in the poem, and the female characters are now dominant, and not only does the Queen have power, but so do all the women in the land when the knight seeks to find the answer to his question: what story sends the message that mans lust for power often can have negative effects on their life and society. Be continually trying to exemplify ones dominance, as an individuals power and morals may be lost.The idea of power is woven throughout the poem. The Knights were always more dominate over the women. As his punishment, he must find out what women must desire, which he realizes what they most desire is power. The knights punishment fits his crime, as he must yield his power over his own body. Sovereignty:Another theme in The Wife of Baths Tale is sovereignty, and the desire for freedom. At the beginning of the poem, when the woman is raped by the knight, therefore taking away her authority to make decisions on her own behalf. As the story progresses, and the night must discover what women desire the most, he learns that what women want most is their own sovereignty; to be able to make decisions on their own behalf. This poem expresses the natural desire for freedom in the lives of ordinary people.Feminism:The Wife of Baths Tale advocates for feminism, as the entire story relates to the importance of females living and making their own personal decisions, free of the influence of men. For example, when the knight is initially sentenced to death, the Queen proposes a better punishment, giving the knight the opportunity to change his character while learning from his mistake. The purpose of this is to present the idea that females should have a say in decision making, rather than solely the me.Feminism is a very prominent theme in the poem The Wife of Baths Tale. The message of the story states that women and men should have equal rights and women should be able to make their own decisions. In reference to the story, the knight lets his wife choose if she wants to remain old and ugly or if she wants to transform into a young damsel. This highlights the fact that women are entitled to make their own decisions. Principles:The main principle in The Wife of Baths Tale is gentility. The definition of gentility was thought to be a quality of a person where the male world of noble deeds and behave virtuously. The big question in the poem is whether or not gentility is something that is inherent in a certain class, or if done by ones actions. Poverty:The loathly lady in the poem goes into a long speech about the virtues of poverty. Just like her rant on gentility, she tries to convince the Knight that people who are poor can still be rich. The easiest way she does this is by pointing out the things that poor men have that rich men lack. Wealth:It seems that wealth is a main idea that is quite important to the characters in this poem. Those with more money are regarded much higher, in that the Knight often mentions how he wishes his wife were poor. Also, when asking around the key question What do women want most?, the knight discovers that some women answer with rich array. This is due to the period of time in which the poem takes place, as those who displayed their wealth through materialistic items were looked highly upon. The wife of bath, however, exhibits humbleness when she states that she would prefer to be the Knights wife than to have all the silver and gold in the world, therefore appreciating love above wealth. When arguing with her husband, the wife explains that Jesus Himself chose to live in poverty. Therefore, the overlying theme exhibited is that wealth represents the superficial aspects of life. Religion:Throughout the poem, there are frequent remarks regarding religion and its importance at this time. When the characters express intense emotions such as happiness, or grief, they will often make reference to God, therefore confirming that Christianity plays a large part in this poem. At one point, the wife states, The High God, in Whom we believe, say I, in voluntary poverty lived his life. This quotation is enhancing the fact that making reference to Jesus was powerful enough to sway ones opinion. Destiny:Since near the beginning of the poem, the characters are very absorbed in the journey one must take to decide their fate. In the beginning, the King hands the knights life in the Queens hands, in which she essentially gives him a goal he must complete in order to live. Towards the end, the knight hands his own life to his wife, as she decides their fate. Therefore, it seems that the fate of the knight is determined solely by the power of female characters.Appearances play a large part in the plot of The Wife of Baths Tale mainly because the poem centres around the transformation of an old and ugly lady into a beautiful young woman. Most poems with this theme generally are about how the main character learns to appreciate people for their personal qualities as opposed to their physical appearance. However, this poem is about how a knight learns to give up sovereignty to his wife. During the middle ages (the time period in which this poem was written), women did not have any rights and they acted as slaves to their husbands. However, The Wife of Baths Tale contradicts this ideology as the knight lets his wife make some decisions for herself. All in all, one of the themes of The Wife of Baths Tale is that men should let women make their own decisions even if it will sacrifice their social appearance.Old Age:The theme of old age in the poem The Wife Baths Tale, revolves around the old and ugly lady. Near the end of the poem, the loathly lady saves the knight from his death by providing him with the correct answer to the question: what is it that women desire most?As a result, the poem suggests that old age makes one wise and useful. However, it does not make one suitable to marry a young bachelor, which is why the old lady transforms into a young damsel. But now kan no man se none elves mo, For now the grete charitee and prayers of lymytours and other hooly freres, That serchen every lond and every stream, As thikke as motes in the some-bee, Blessyng halle, chambres, kichens, boures, Cities, burghes, castels, hye toures, Thropes, bernes, shippes, dayerwes This maketh that ther ben no fayeres. For ther as wont to walken was an elfe Ther walken now mo the lymytour myselfe. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. Hundreds of years ago in the days of King Arthur elves and fairies roamed Britain, says the Wife of Bath. Now these magical creatures have been replaced by holy friars who have overrun the country and are lurking everywhere. In cities, castles, villages, blessing halls, kitchens, bedrooms, barns and stables. They are, to quote Alisons simile, as thick as specks of dust in the sunbeam. There is nowhere that Christianity doesnt reach. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. Now women dont have to worry about demons hiding in the forest and accosting and impregnating them, says the Wife of Bath. They have to worry about friars, who would do them nothing but dishonor. An incubus is a male demon who sexual intercourse with sleeping women, sometimes producing a child with them. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. King Arthur has a lusty bachelor Knight who is out riding one day and happens upon a maiden walking. By force, despite all her struggles, he takes away her maidenhead (virginity), the Wife of Bath reveals he rapes her! As knights are meant to be noble and honorable and act with chivalry and respect everyone, it is an irony that he commits such a crime. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The Knights crime of rape of the maiden provokes such anger amongst the people and demand for justice from King Arthur that the Knight is condemned to death. That is the legal penalty for such a crime. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The lucky Knight gets a reprieve from execution when the queen with her ladies intercedes with the king to ask him for mercy. The king grants the Knight his life and hands him over to the queen, who has the power to chose whether she will save him or put him to death. There is an irony in the Knights situation: he commits a crime against a woman and now King Arthur puts his fate in the hands of another woman, the queen, who has mastery over him and the power to say if he lives or dies. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The female tribunal led by the queen grants life to the young Knight facing beheaded for raping a maiden, on one condition. He must answer one question: what is it that women most desire? If he cannot answer the question there and then, he is given twelve months to come up with a satisfactory answer. If he fails, he faces the axe on his neck. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The Knight searches the land on his quest to find out what women love most. He is told that some love riches, others honor, jolliness, rich clothes, good sex, and many want to be widowed and re-wed. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. So how does a man win over a womans heart? Some people tell the Knight that a womans heart is most eased when they are flattered and pleased, and given constant attention. Those people who said this go very near the truth, admits Alison The Wife of Bath. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. Here the Knights research on what a woman most desires are almost identical to the Wife of Baths own views that we read earlier in the Prologue. Women wish to be free to do just as they please, and that no man reproves them for their vices but instead say that they are wise and not at all silly. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. No matter how much vice a person has inside them they want to be thought of as wise and clean from sin, says the Wife of Bath. And if someone scratches them on that sore spot and tells them the truth, they will kick back. Nobody, including men, wants to be reproved for their vices, she appears to be saying. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. Some people say that women are steadfast, with a constancy of purpose, says the Wife of Bath. And they are able to keep a secret and not reveal things that men tell them. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The Knight sees twenty-four young maidens dancing and singing near a forests side. But when he ventures towards them hoping to learn some wisdom of what a woman desires, the dancing maidens vanish and sitting on the green is an ugly old wife the Loathly Lady (or hag). She rises at the Knights approaches. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The old woman tells the Knight that there are no roads out of the place. She asks him what he seeks, saying that old folk like her know many things and she might be able to help. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. No matter how ugly, old and poor a woman is, she desires love and to have a mate. The Loathly Lady declares that she would prefer to be the Knights wife and love than to have all the gold and silver in the world. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The Knight is commanded to appear before the court of the queen sitting as a judge with her assembled ladies to give his answer to the queens riddle: what is it that women want? Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The answer to the queens riddle revealed to her and her female tribunal by the Knight: what women desire above all else. A question that would be echoed hundreds of years later by founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud in a letter to Marie Bonaparte. The Knight says that women want sovereignty and to have mastery over their husbands. This is precisely what Alison the Wife of Bath also said during her Prologue. The Knights response saves his bacon, all the women in the court agrees with what he has said and believe he is worthy to have his life. Mercy, quod she, "my sovereign lady queen! Er that youre court departe, do me right. I taughte this answeure unto the knyght; For which he plighte me his trouthe there. The firste thing that I wolde hym requere He wolde it do, if it lay in my myghte. Before the court thanne preyre I thee, sir knyght," Quod she, "that thou me take unto thy wyf, For wel thou wost that I have kept thy lyf. If I seeye fals, sey nay, upon thy feye!" Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. This passage is all about woman power. The Loathly Lady who provided the Knight with the answer to the queens riddle speaks up before the queens court, requesting that she the grant her her right. She announces the Knights pledge that the first thing she would ask of him he would do, if it lay in his power. So she calls on the Knight to honor his promise and marry her. Women may go as far as to say that she strikes her so hard upon the head that she falls to the ground as if she were dying. While in a way the Wife initiated the altercation by fearlessly tearing the pages out of her husbands book, it seems at this moment that she has fallen victim to his masculine authority. As a character with unique status among women who has had five marriagesThe Wife of Bath seems to be disgruntled by her ability to overcome traditional barriers of this period. Yet, at this moment, granted that it is read as deeply serious, she appears rather vulnerable. 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The Wife of Bath's Tale is a notable literary work by Geoffrey Chaucer. A complete discussion of this literary work is given, which will help you enhance your literary skills and prepare for the exam. Read the Main texts, Key info, Summary, Themes, Characters, Literary devices, Quotations, Notes, and various study materials of The Wife of Bath's Tale. Power and Sovereignty in RelationshipsA central theme of the tale is the struggle for power within relationships. The Wife of Bath, in both her prologue and tale, argues that women desire sovereignty over their husbands and lovers. This idea is embodied in the tales resolution, where the knight learns that true harmony in a relationship comes from granting his wife autonomy. The old crone transforms into a beautiful and loyal wife only after the knight gives her control. It suggests that mutual respect and shared power lead to a successful partnership. The theme reflects the Wife of Baths own belief in using her gifts to maintain power over her husbands. Power:Power is a dominant theme in The Wife of Baths Tale, as at the beginning of the story, men hold all power, which is represented by the knight's character. However, after raping the women, the knight is sentenced to die by the king until Queen Guinevere proposes different punishment. At this point, power is reversed in the poem, and the female characters are now dominant, and not only does the Queen have power, but so do all the women in the land when the knight seeks to find the answer to his question: what story sends the message that mans lust for power often can have negative effects on their life and society. Be continually trying to exemplify ones dominance, as an individuals power and morals may be lost.The idea of power is woven throughout the poem. The Knights were always more dominate over the women. As his punishment, he must find out what women must desire, which he realizes what they most desire is power. The knights punishment fits his crime, as he must yield his power over his own body. Sovereignty:Another theme in The Wife of Baths Tale is sovereignty, and the desire for freedom. At the beginning of the poem, when the woman is raped by the knight, therefore taking away her authority to make decisions on her own behalf. As the story progresses, and the night must discover what women desire the most, he learns that what women want most is their own sovereignty; to be able to make decisions on their own behalf. This poem expresses the natural desire for freedom in the lives of ordinary people.Feminism:The Wife of Baths Tale advocates for feminism, as the entire story relates to the importance of females living and making their own personal decisions, free of the influence of men. For example, when the knight is initially sentenced to death, the Queen proposes a better punishment, giving the knight the opportunity to change his character while learning from his mistake. The purpose of this is to present the idea that females should have a say in decision making, rather than solely the me.Feminism is a very prominent theme in the poem The Wife of Baths Tale. The message of the story states that women and men should have equal rights and women should be able to make their own decisions. In reference to the story, the knight lets his wife choose if she wants to remain old and ugly or if she wants to transform into a young damsel. This highlights the fact that women are entitled to make their own decisions. Principles:The main principle in The Wife of Baths Tale is gentility. The definition of gentility was thought to be a quality of a person where the male world of noble deeds and behave virtuously. The big question in the poem is whether or not gentility is something that is inherent in a certain class, or if done by ones actions. Poverty:The loathly lady in the poem goes into a long speech about the virtues of poverty. Just like her rant on gentility, she tries to convince the Knight that people who are poor can still be rich. The easiest way she does this is by pointing out the things that poor men have that rich men lack. Wealth:It seems that wealth is a main idea that is quite important to the characters in this poem. Those with more money are regarded much higher, in that the Knight often mentions how he wishes his wife were poor. Also, when asking around the key question What do women want most?, the knight discovers that some women answer with rich array. This is due to the period of time in which the poem takes place, as those who displayed their wealth through materialistic items were looked highly upon. The wife of bath, however, exhibits humbleness when she states that she would prefer to be the Knights wife than to have all the silver and gold in the world, therefore appreciating love above wealth. When arguing with her husband, the wife explains that Jesus Himself chose to live in poverty. Therefore, the overlying theme exhibited is that wealth represents the superficial aspects of life. Religion:Throughout the poem, there are frequent remarks regarding religion and its importance at this time. When the characters express intense emotions such as happiness, or grief, they will often make reference to God, therefore confirming that Christianity plays a large part in this poem. At one point, the wife states, The High God, in Whom we believe, say I, in voluntary poverty lived his life. This quotation is enhancing the fact that making reference to Jesus was powerful enough to sway ones opinion. Destiny:Since near the beginning of the poem, the characters are very absorbed in the journey one must take to decide their fate. In the beginning, the King hands the knights life in the Queens hands, in which she essentially gives him a goal he must complete in order to live. Towards the end, the knight hands his own life to his wife, as she decides their fate. Therefore, it seems that the fate of the knight is determined solely by the power of female characters.Appearances play a large part in the plot of The Wife of Baths Tale mainly because the poem centres around the transformation of an old and ugly lady into a beautiful young woman. Most poems with this theme generally are about how the main character learns to appreciate people for their personal qualities as opposed to their physical appearance. However, this poem is about how a knight learns to give up sovereignty to his wife. During the middle ages (the time period in which this poem was written), women did not have any rights and they acted as slaves to their husbands. However, The Wife of Baths Tale contradicts this ideology as the knight lets his wife make some decisions for herself. All in all, one of the themes of The Wife of Baths Tale is that men should let women make their own decisions even if it will sacrifice their social appearance.Old Age:The theme of old age in the poem The Wife Baths Tale, revolves around the old and ugly lady. Near the end of the poem, the loathly lady saves the knight from his death by providing him with the correct answer to the question: what is it that women desire most?As a result, the poem suggests that old age makes one wise and useful. However, it does not make one suitable to marry a young bachelor, which is why the old lady transforms into a young damsel. But now kan no man se none elves mo, For now the grete charitee and prayers of lymytours and other hooly freres, That serchen every lond and every stream, As thikke as motes in the some-bee, Blessyng halle, chambres, kichens, boures, Cities, burghes, castels, hye toures, Thropes, bernes, shippes, dayerwes This maketh that ther ben no fayeres. For ther as wont to walken was an elfe Ther walken now mo the lymytour myselfe. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. Hundreds of years ago in the days of King Arthur elves and fairies roamed Britain, says the Wife of Bath. Now these magical creatures have been replaced by holy friars who have overrun the country and are lurking everywhere. In cities, castles, villages, blessing halls, kitchens, bedrooms, barns and stables. They are, to quote Alisons simile, as thick as specks of dust in the sunbeam. There is nowhere that Christianity doesnt reach. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. Now women dont have to worry about demons hiding in the forest and accosting and impregnating them, says the Wife of Bath. They have to worry about friars, who would do them nothing but dishonor. An incubus is a male demon who sexual intercourse with sleeping women, sometimes producing a child with them. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. King Arthur has a lusty bachelor Knight who is out riding one day and happens upon a maiden walking. By force, despite all her struggles, he takes away her maidenhead (virginity), the Wife of Bath reveals he rapes her! As knights are meant to be noble and honorable and act with chivalry and respect everyone, it is an irony that he commits such a crime. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The Knights crime of rape of the maiden provokes such anger amongst the people and demand for justice from King Arthur that the Knight is condemned to death. That is the legal penalty for such a crime. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The lucky Knight gets a reprieve from execution when the queen with her ladies intercedes with the king to ask him for mercy. The king grants the Knight his life and hands him over to the queen, who has the power to chose whether she will save him or put him to death. There is an irony in the Knights situation: he commits a crime against a woman and now King Arthur puts his fate in the hands of another woman, the queen, who has mastery over him and the power to say if he lives or dies. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The female tribunal led by the queen grants life to the young Knight facing beheaded for raping a maiden, on one condition. He must answer one question: what is it that women most desire? If he cannot answer the question there and then, he is given twelve months to come up with a satisfactory answer. If he fails, he faces the axe on his neck. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The Knight searches the land on his quest to find out what women love most. He is told that some love riches, others honor, jolliness, rich clothes, good sex, and many want to be widowed and re-wed. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. So how does a man win over a womans heart? Some people tell the Knight that a womans heart is most eased when they are flattered and pleased, and given constant attention. Those people who said this go very near the truth, admits Alison The Wife of Bath. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. Here the Knights research on what a woman most desires are almost identical to the Wife of Baths own views that we read earlier in the Prologue. Women wish to be free to do just as they please, and that no man reproves them for their vices but instead say that they are wise and not at all silly. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. No matter how much vice a person has inside them they want to be thought of as wise and clean from sin, says the Wife of Bath. And if someone scratches them on that sore spot and tells them the truth, they will kick back. Nobody, including men, wants to be reproved for their vices, she appears to be saying. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. Some people say that women are steadfast, with a constancy of purpose, says the Wife of Bath. And they are able to keep a secret and not reveal things that men tell them. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The Knight sees twenty-four young maidens dancing and singing near a forests side. But when he ventures towards them hoping to learn some wisdom of what a woman desires, the dancing maidens vanish and sitting on the green is an ugly old wife the Loathly Lady (or hag). She rises at the Knights approaches. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The old woman tells the Knight that there are no roads out of the place. She asks him what he seeks, saying that old folk like her know many things and she might be able to help. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. No matter how ugly, old and poor a woman is, she desires love and to have a mate. The Loathly Lady declares that she would prefer to be the Knights wife and love than to have all the gold and silver in the world. Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The Knight is commanded to appear before the court of the queen sitting as a judge with her assembled ladies to give his answer to the queens riddle: what is it that women want? Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. The answer to the queens riddle revealed to her and her female tribunal by the Knight: what women desire above all else. A question that would be echoed hundreds of years later by founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud in a letter to Marie Bonaparte. The Knight says that women want sovereignty and to have mastery over their husbands. This is precisely what Alison the Wife of Bath also said during her Prologue. The Knights response saves his bacon, all the women in the court agrees with what he has said and believe he is worthy to have his life. Mercy, quod she, "my sovereign lady queen! Er that youre court departe, do me right. I taughte this answeure unto the knyght; For which he plighte me his trouthe there. The firste thing that I wolde hym requere He wolde it do, if it lay in my myghte. Before the court thanne preyre I thee, sir knyght," Quod she, "that thou me take unto thy wyf, For wel thou wost that I have kept thy lyf. If I seeye fals, sey nay, upon thy feye!" Geoffrey ChaucerThe Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Baths Tale. This passage is all about woman power. The Loathly Lady who provided the Knight with the answer to the queens riddle speaks up before the queens court, requesting that she the grant her her right. She announces the Knights pledge that the first thing she would ask of him he would do, if it lay in his power. So she calls on the Knight to honor his promise and marry her. Women may go as far as to say that she strikes her so hard upon the head that she falls to the ground as if she were dying. While in a way the Wife initiated the altercation by fearlessly tearing the pages out of her husbands book, it seems at this moment that she has fallen victim to his masculine authority. As a character with unique status among women who has had five marriagesThe Wife of Bath seems to be disgruntled by her ability to overcome traditional barriers of this period. Yet, at this moment, granted that it is read as deeply serious, she appears rather vulnerable. Her insistence on misogynistic views, represented by her ripping out the book pages, has led her to her current, nearly dead. This scene is then almost directly contradicted by the Wife asserting her power in the relationship, which adds to Chaucers complex characterization.As I have God, I shal the never smite. That I have miske, And wit of foomes, I litte him. And said, This yveus mysel am I. Now wol I speke. (811-16)[4]After her husband knocks her to the ground he seems to be genuinely worried that she has died. He even pleads with God that he may never smite her again, a word associated with rather violent religious imagery. She retaliates by striking him on the cheek and declaring that she has been avenged, and now she will die. In essence, the Wife is challenging the power dynamics of the previous scene by securing both the last word and the last punch. This scene is complex because it is unclear how Chaucer wants the reader to interpret the gravity of the violence and its implications. Is the tone entirely serious and the Wife is in fact weakened by the masculinity of her husband? Or is this another comical story in which she assumes an empowered yet outlandish role? The diction suggests that the latter question is present in some form. The Wifes final statement: Now wol I die: I may no longer speke is dramatic, and embellishes the scene as a sort of spectacle. However, there is an underlying darkness that derives from the horror of the scene. The Wife is lying nearly dead on the floor, struck so hard by this man she seems to love that she has gone deaf in one ear. Unlike previous stories The Wife has told, there is a harrowing aspect to this experience. 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