**European Literature: Middle Ages**

**In this six-week unit, students explore the tension between the divine and the human in the literature of the Middle Ages.**

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**Overview**

* + Although the Middle Ages often is characterized as a period of darkness, the literature and art of the time typically suggest a more complex picture. Through a combination of close reading and exposure to an array of texts, students observe how satire reveals some of the contradictions and divergences within medieval literature and will draw connections between literary form and philosophy. In addition, they consider how certain traits of medieval literature can also be found in the art of the period: for instance, how characters have symbolic meaning both in literature and in iconography. Students write essays in which they analyze a work closely, compare two works, or trace an idea or theme throughout the works they have read.
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**Focus Standards**

* + These Focus Standards have been selected for the unit from the Common Core State Standards.
    - **RL.11-12.5:** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
    - **RI.11-12.2:** Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
    - **W.11-12.1(a-e):**Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
    - **SL.11-12.4:**Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range or formal and informal tasks.
    - **L.11-12.3(a):**Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

[Common Core State Standards, ELA](http://commoncore.org/free/resources/CCSSI_ELA_Standards.pdf) (1.5 MB)

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**Suggested Student Objectives**

* + - Consider how medieval literature exhibits many tendencies rather than a single set of characteristics.
    - Observe literary elements (e.g., allegory, farce, satire, foil) in medieval literary works and identify characteristics of medieval literary forms.
    - Understand how literary elements contribute to meaning and author intention.
    - Consider glimpses of the Renaissance in certain works of medieval literature and art.
    - Consider how medieval literary and artistic forms reflect the writers’ and artists’ philosophical views.
    - Examine the literary, social, and religious satire in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.
    - Consider the role of the framed narrative in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Dante’s *Inferno*, and other works.
    - Compare works of medieval literature and art, particularly their depiction of character and their focus on the otherworldly.
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**Suggested Works**

* + (E) indicates a CCSS exemplar text; (EA) indicates a text from a writer with other works identified as exemplars.

**Literary Texts**

**Epic Poems**

* + - *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Anonymous)
    - *Inferno* (Dante Alighieri) (Cantos I-XI, XXXI-XXXIV)

**Stories**

* + - *The Decameron*(Giovanni Boccaccio) (continued in unit two)

**Literary Nonfiction**

* + - *Confessions* (Saint Augustine) (Book XI)

**Plays**

* + - *The Summoning of Everyman* (Anonymous)
    - *Farce of Master Pierre Pathelin* (Anonymous)

**Poems**

* + - “When the leaf sings” (Arnaut Daniel)
    - “The bitter air”(Arnaut Daniel)
    - “I see scarlet, green, blue, white, yellow” (Arnaut Daniel)
    - “The Ruin” in *The Exeter Book* (Anonymous)
    - “The Wanderer” in *The Exeter Book* (Anonymous)
    - The General Prologue in *The Canterbury Tales* (Geoffrey Chaucer) (E)
    - “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* (Geoffrey Chaucer) (E)
    - “The Knight’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* (Geoffrey Chaucer) (E)
    - “The Monk’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* (Geoffrey Chaucer) (E)
    - “The Pardoner’s Tale”in *The Canterbury Tales* (Geoffrey Chaucer) (E)
    - “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* (Geoffrey Chaucer) (E)
    - “Lord Randall” (Anonymous)
    - “Dance of Death” (“Danza de la Muerte”) (Anonymous)

**Informational Texts**

**Historical Nonfiction**

* + - *The One and the Many in the Canterbury Tales* (Traugott Lawler)
    - *Medieval Images, Icons, and Illustrated English Literary Texts: From Ruthwell Cross to the Ellesmere Chaucer* (Maidie Hilmo)
    - *St. Thomas Aquinas* (G. K. Chesterton)
    - *The History of the Medieval World: From the Conversion of Constantine to the First Crusade* (Susan Wise Bauer)

**Art, Music, and Media**

*Prompt:  Can we see as man, both the earthly and divine, begins to take on human characteristics as the Middle Ages wane?*

**Art**

* + - Cimabue, [*Maest*à](http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/c/cimabue/madonna/madonna.html) (1280)
    - Giotto, [Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel frescos](http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/giotto/padova/) (after 1305)
      * [Joachim Among the Shepards](http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/giotto/padova/)
      * [Meeting at the Golden Gate](http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/giotto/padova/)
      * [Raising of Lazarus](http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/giotto/padova/)
      * [Jonah Swallowed Up by the Whale](http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/giotto/padova/)
    - Gustave Doré, [illustrations](http://dore.artpassions.net/) for Dante’s *Inferno*
    - Lorenzo Ghiberti, [Gates of Paradise](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorenzo_Ghiberti) (1425-1452)
    - Hans Holbein, *Dance of Death* (1538)
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**Sample Activities and Assessments**

* + *Note: After reading and discussing a work or pairing of works as a class, students prepare for seminars and essays by reflecting individually, in pairs, and/or in small groups on a given seminar/essay question. Ideas are student generated in this way. (Seminar/Essay assignments include more than one question. Teachers may choose one or all the questions to explore in the course of the seminar; students should choose one question for the essay.)  Seminars should be held before students write essays so that they may explore their ideas thoroughly and refine their thinking before writing. (Click* [*here*](http://commoncore.org/free/index.php/maps/grade_12_unit_1/) *to see a sample seminar scoring rubric.)  Page and word counts for essays are not provided, but teachers should consider the suggestions regarding the use of evidence, for example, to determine the likely length of good essays. In future iterations of these maps, links to samples of student work will be provided.*

**Collaborate**

Reflect on seminar questions, take notes on your responses, and note the page numbers of the textual evidence you will refer to in your seminar and/or essay answers. Share your notes with a partner for feedback and guidance. Have you interpreted the text correctly? Is your evidence convincing? (RL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.1)

**Seminar and Essay**

Compare and contrast *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and “The Knight’s Tale.” What are the qualities of the ideal knight? Do they differ at all? Use textual evidence from both texts to support an original, concise thesis. (RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.4, W.11-12.2)

**Seminar and Essay**

Choose one of the *Canterbury Tales*. Explain how the main character shows his or her personality through narration. How do fabliaux reveal the point of view of the character? Use textual evidence to support an original, concise thesis statement. (RL.11-12.5, RI.11-12.2, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.4, W.11-12.2)

**Seminar and Essay**

Compare “The Monk’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* with Dante’s story of Ugolino in Cantos XXXII-XXXIII of the *Inferno*, paying special attention to depiction of character. Use at least one critical source. Use textual evidence to support an original, concise thesis statement. (RL.11-12.3, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.4, W.11-12.2, W.11-12.7, L.11-12.3)

**Seminar and Essay**

Is the Wife of Bath from *A Canterbury Tales* a feminist? Use textual evidence to support an original, concise thesis. (RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.4, W.11-12.2)

**Seminar and Essay**

Discuss “The Pardoner’s Tale” as a satire. What, exactly, is being literally described versus being satirized? Why does Chaucer use satire? Is Chaucer satirizing human nature or the church as an establishment? Use textual evidence to support an original, concise thesis statement. (RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3, RL.11-12.5, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.4, W.11-12.2)

**Essay**

Draw parallels between representations of character in a medieval play and in medieval icons. Compare and contrast their similarities and differences. Are they more alike or different? Use concrete evidence from both texts to support an original, concise thesis statement.  (RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3, W.11-12.2)

**Seminar and Essay**

Explain how Saint Augustine attempts to resolve a paradox in Book XI of the *Confessions*. Is his resolution convincing? Why or why not? (RI.11-12.5, W.11-12.1, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.3)

**Seminar and Essay**

Read Augustine’s Book XI of the *Confessions*. Agree or disagree with Augustine’s idea: “Evil stems not from God but from a perversion of human will.” Use textual evidence to support an original, concise thesis statement. (RI.11-12.5, W.11-12.1, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.3)

**Speech**

Select one of the poems from this unit and recite it from memory. Include an introduction that states:

* + - What the excerpt is from;
    - Who wrote it;
    - Why it exemplifies the medieval period. (SL.11-12.4)

**Seminar and Essay**

“To what degree does medieval literature regard human existence as secondary to the divine?” Use textual evidence from one of the texts read in this unit to support an original, concise thesis statement. (RL.11-12.2, W.11-12.1, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.3)

**Seminar and Essay**

Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* alludes to Dante’s allegorical model. Why does he satirize Dante’s allegorical model? What is revealed by this satire? Is Boccaccio enlightened and, therefore, a man ahead of this time? Use textual evidence from both texts to support an original, concise thesis statement. (RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3, RL.11-12.6, RL.11-12.5, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.4, W.11-12.2)

**Seminar and Essay**

Read Dante’s *Inferno*. How does the allegory reveal the values of the Middle Ages? What sins are punished most severely and why? Do you agree with the hierarchical circles of hell Dante creates? Use textual evidence to support an original, concise thesis statement. (RL.11-12.1, RL.11-12.3, RL.11-12.6, RL.11-12.5, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.4, W.11-12.2)

**Research Paper**

Does the term “dark ages” accurately describe the Middle Ages? Use primary and secondary sources from this unit or outside of the unit to support an original, concise thesis statement to answer the question. (RL.11-12.1, W.11-12.1, W.11-12.7, W.11-12.8)

**Research Paper**

Answer the essential question: “How does medieval literature suggest a preoccupation with both divine and earthly existence?” Use primary and secondary sources from this unit or outside of the unit to support an original thesis statement to answer the question. (RL.11-12.1, W.11-12.1, W.11-12.7, W.11-12.8)

[Scoring Rubric](http://commoncore.org/free/resources/Socratic_Seminar_Rubric_SP.doc)

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**Additional Resources**

* + - [**Danteworlds**](http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/)(The University of Texas at Austin) (RL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.3)  
      This University of Texas at Austin website combines artistic images, textual commentary, and audio recordings--through the three realms of the afterlife (Inferno, Purgatory, Paradise) presented in Dante's *Divine Comedy.*
    - [**Digital Dante**](http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/images/index.html)(Institute for Learning Technologies, Columbia University)  
      A website devoted to art inspired by Dante’s work.
    - [**Chaucer's Wife of Bath**](http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=287)(National Endowment for the Humanities) (RL.11-12.3)  
      This lesson helps students understand the complexities of the Wife of Bath's character and the rhetoric of her argument by exploring the various ways in which Chaucer crafts a persona for her.
    - [**Canterbury Tales Project**](http://www.canterburytalesproject.org/CTPlinks.html)(ITSEE, University of Birmingham)  
      A page of links to resources on Chaucer, the Canterbury Tales, and the Middle Ages, hosted by the Canterbury Tales Project.
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**Terminology**

* + - allegory
    - anonymity
    - caesura
    - “Dance of Death”
    - epic
    - farce
    - foil
    - framed narrative
    - hyperbole
    - icon (religious art)
    - miracle, mystery, and morality plays
    - perspective (art and literature)
    - fabliaux
    - symbol