TEXT ANALYSIS: NARRATOR

The narrator of a story is the character or voice that relates the story’s events to the reader. Many narrators have distinct personalities that are revealed through the subject matter, tone, and language of their stories. In this selection, the narrator is the Wife of Bath, one of the most charismatic characters in The Canterbury Tales—and, arguably, in all of English literature. As you read, notice what she reveals about herself and medieval society in her lively tale.

READING SKILL: ANALYZE STRUCTURE

The Canterbury Tales has a sophisticated structure, or organization. The collection features a frame story—a story that surrounds and binds together one or more different narratives in a single work. The main story about the pilgrimage serves this purpose. It unifies 24 unrelated tales and provides a rationale for the entire collection.

In the interludes between the pilgrims’ tales, the characters often argue with one another. Within the tales, narrators sometimes digress in their storytelling. Both types of interruptions contribute to the poem’s overall meaning and its aesthetic impact. Use a chart like the one shown to keep track of these breaks in narration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interruptions</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Pardoner interrupts the Wife of Bath (lines 1–6).</td>
<td>The previous discussion has made him afraid to marry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The boldfaced words help convey the wit and charm of the Wife of Bath. Use context clues to guess the meaning of each.

1. implore someone for a favor  
2. cackle like a crone  
3. the king’s sovereignty  
4. bequeath a legacy  
5. everyday temporal concerns  
6. rebuke someone for a mistake

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
The Pardoner started up, and thereupon
"Madam," he said, "by God and by St. John,
That's noble preaching no one could surpass!
I was about to take a wife; alas!
Am I to buy it on my flesh so dear?
There'll be no marrying for me this year!"

"You wait," she said, "my story's not begun.
You'll taste another brew before I've done;
You'll find it doesn't taste as good as ale;
And when I've finished telling you my tale
Of tribulation in the married life
In which I've been an expert as a wife,
That is to say, myself have been the whip.
So please yourself whether you want to sip
At that same cask of marriage I shall broach.
Be cautious before making the approach,
For I'll give instances, and more than ten.
And those who won't be warned by other men,
By other men shall suffer their correction,
So Ptolemy has said, in this connection.
You read his *Almagest*; you'll find it there."  

"Madam, I put it to you as a prayer,"
The Pardoner said, "go on as you began!
Tell us your tale, spare not for any man.
Instruct us younger men in your technique."
"Gladly," she said, "if you will let me speak,
But still I hope the company won't reprove me
Though I should speak as fantasy may move me,
And please don't be offended at my views;
They're really only offered to amuse. . . ."
The **wife of bath’s tale**

When good King Arthur ruled in ancient days
(A king that every Briton loves to praise)
This was a land brim-full of fairy folk.
The Elf-Queen and her courtiers joined and broke
Their elfin dance on many a green mead,
Or so was the opinion once, I read,
Hundreds of years ago, in days of yore.
But no one now sees fairies any more.
For now the saintly charity and prayer
Of holy friars seem to have purged the air;
They search the countryside through field and stream
As thick as motes that speckle a sun-beam,
Blessing the halls, the chambers, kitchens, bowers,
Cities and boroughs, castles, courts and towers,
Thorpes, barns and stables, outhouses and dairies,
And that’s the reason why there are no fairies.
Wherever there was wont to walk an elf
Today there walks the holy friar himself
As evening falls or when the daylight springs,
Saying his matins and his holy things,
Walking his limit round from town to town.
Women can now go safely up and down
By every bush or under every tree;
There is no other incubus but he,
So there is really no one else to hurt you
And he will do no more than take your virtue.

Now it so happened, I began to say,
Long, long ago in good King Arthur’s day,
There was a knight who was a lusty liver.
One day as he came riding from the river
He saw a maiden walking all forlorn
Ahead of him, alone as she was born.
And of that maiden, spite of all she said,
By very force he took her maidenhead.
This act of violence made such a stir,
So much petitioning to the king for her,
That he condemned the knight to lose his head
By course of law. He was as good as dead
(It seems that then the statutes took that view)
But that the queen, and other ladies too,
Implored the king to exercise his grace
So ceaselessly, he gave the queen the case
And granted her his life, and she could choose
Whether to show him mercy or refuse.

75  The queen returned him thanks with all her might,
And then she sent a summons to the knight
At her convenience, and expressed her will:
“You stand, for such is the position still,
In no way certain of your life,” said she,
80 “Yet you shall live if you can answer me:
What is the thing that women most desire?
Beware the axe and say as I require.

“If you can’t answer on the moment, though,
I will concede you this: you are to go
A twelvemonth and a day to seek and learn
Sufficient answer, then you shall return.
I shall take gages from you to extort
Surrender of your body to the court.”

Sad was the knight and sorrowfully sighed,
But there! All other choices were denied,
And in the end he chose to go away
And to return after a year and day
Armed with such answer as there might be sent
To him by God. He took his leave and went.

He knocked at every house, searched every place,
Yes, anywhere that offered hope of grace.
What could it be that women wanted most?
But all the same he never touched a coast,
Country or town in which there seemed to be
Any two people willing to agree.

Some said that women wanted wealth and treasure,
“Honor,” said some, some “Jollity and pleasure,”
Some “Gorgeous clothes” and others “Fun in bed,”
“To be oft widowed and remarried,” said
Others again, and some that what most mattered
Was that we should be cosseted and flattered.
That’s very near the truth, it seems to me;
A man can win us best with flattery.
To dance attendance on us, make a fuss,
Ensnares us all, the best and worst of us.

Some say the things we most desire are these:
Freedom to do exactly as we please,
With no one to reprove our faults and lies,
Rather to have one call us good and wise.
Truly there’s not a woman in ten score
Who has a fault, and someone rubs the sore,
But she will kick if what he says is true;
You try it out and you will find so too.
However vicious we may be within
We like to be thought wise and void of sin.
Others assert we women find it sweet
When we are thought dependable, discreet
And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,
Never betraying things that we are told.
But that’s not worth the handle of a rake;
Women conceal a thing? For Heaven’s sake!
Remember Midas? Will you hear the tale?

Among some other little things, now stale,
Ovid relates that under his long hair
The unhappy Midas grew a splendid pair
Of ass’s ears; as subtly as he might,
He kept his foul deformity from sight;

95 100 105 110 115 120 125 130

106 cosseted (kös’t-id): pampered.

NARRATOR
What is the narrator’s opinion of flattery in lines 101–110? Consider what this view suggests about her personality.

115 ten score: 200.

117 but she will: who will not.

120 void of sin: sinless.

127 Midas: a legendary king of Phrygia, in Asia Minor.

129 Ovid (ōv’id): an ancient Roman poet whose Metamorphoses is a storehouse of Greek and Roman legends. According to Ovid, it was a barber, not Midas’s wife, who told the secret of his donkey’s ears.
Save for his wife, there was not one that knew.
He loved her best, and trusted in her too.

He begged her not to tell a living creature
That he possessed so horrible a feature.
And she—she swore, were all the world to win,
She would not do such villainy and sin
As saddle her husband with so foul a name;

Besides to speak would be to share the shame.
Nevertheless she thought she would have died
Keeping this secret bottled up inside;
It seemed to swell her heart and she, no doubt,
Thought it was on the point of bursting out.

Fearing to speak of it to woman or man,
Down to a reedy marsh she quickly ran
And reached the sedge. Her heart was all on fire
And, as a bittern bumbles in the mire,
She whispered to the water, near the ground,
“Betray me not, O water, with thy sound!
To thee alone I tell it: it appears
My husband has a pair of ass’s ears!
Ah! My heart’s well again, the secret’s out!
I could no longer keep it, not a doubt.”

And so you see, although we may hold fast
A little while, it must come out at last,
We can’t keep secrets; as for Midas, well,
Read Ovid for his story; he will tell.

This knight that I am telling you about
Perceived at last he never would find out
What it could be that women loved the best.
Faint was the soul within his sorrowful breast,
As home he went, he dared no longer stay;
His year was up and now it was the day.

As he rode home in a dejected mood
Suddenly, at the margin of a wood,
He saw a dance upon the leafy floor
Of four and twenty ladies, nay, and more.
Eagerly he approached, in hope to learn
Some words of wisdom ere he should return;
But lo! Before he came to where they were,
Dancers and dance all vanished into air!
There wasn’t a living creature to be seen
Save one old woman crouched upon the green.

A fouler-looking creature I suppose
Could scarcely be imagined. She arose
And said, “Sir knight, there’s no way on from here.
Tell me what you are looking for, my dear,
For peradventure that were best for you;
We old, old women know a thing or two.”

“Dear Mother,” said the knight, “alack the day!
I am as good as dead if I can’t say
What thing it is that women most desire;
If you could tell me I would pay your hire.”

“Give me your hand,” she said, “and swear to do
Whatever I shall next require of you
—If so to do should lie within your might—
And you shall know the answer before night.”

“Upon my honor,” he answered, “I agree.”

“Then,” said the crone, “I dare to guarantee
Your life is safe; I shall make good my claim.
Upon my life the queen will say the same.
Show me the very proudest of them all
In costly coverchief or jewelled caul
That dare say no to what I have to teach.
Let us go forward without further speech.”
And then she crooned her gospel in his ear
And told him to be glad and not to fear.

They came to court. This knight, in full array,
Stood forth and said, “O Queen, I’ve kept my day
And kept my word and have my answer ready.”

There sat the noble matrons and the heady
Young girls, and widows too, that have the grace
Of wisdom, all assembled in that place,
And there the queen herself was throned to hear
And judge his answer. Then the knight drew near
And silence was commanded through the hall.

The queen gave order he should tell them all
What thing it was that women wanted most.
He stood not silent like a beast or post,
But gave his answer with the ringing word
Of a man’s voice and the assembly heard:

“My liege and lady, in general,” said he,
“A woman wants the self-same sovereignty
Over her husband as over her lover,
And master him; he must not be above her.
That is your greatest wish, whether you kill
Or spare me; please yourself. I wait your will."

In all the court not one that shook her head
Or contradicted what the knight had said;
Maid, wife and widow cried, “He’s saved his life!”

And on the word up started the old wife,
The one the knight saw sitting on the green,
And cried, “Your mercy, sovereign lady queen!
Before the court disperses, do me right!
’Twas I who taught this answer to the knight,
For which he swore, and pledged his honor to it,
That the first thing I asked of him he’d do it,
So far as it should lie within his might.
Before this court I ask you then, sir knight,
To keep your word and take me for your wife;
For well you know that I have saved your life.
If this be false, deny it on your sword!”

“Alas!” he said, “Old lady, by the Lord
I know indeed that such was my behest,
But for God’s love think of a new request,
Take all my goods, but leave my body free.”
“A curse on us,” she said, “if I agree!
I may be foul, I may be poor and old,
Yet will not choose to be, for all the gold
That’s bedded in the earth or lies above,
Less than your wife, nay, than your very love!”

“My love?” said he. “By heaven, my damnation!
Alas that any of my race and station
Should ever make so foul a misalliance!”
Yet in the end his pleading and defiance
All went for nothing, he was forced to wed.
He takes his ancient wife and goes to bed.

Now peradventure some may well suspect
A lack of care in me since I neglect
To tell of the rejoicing and display
Made at the feast upon their wedding-day.
I have but a short answer to let fall;
I say there was no joy or feast at all,

Nothing but heaviness of heart and sorrow.
He married her in private on the morrow.
And all day long stayed hidden like an owl,
It was such torture that his wife looked foul.

Great was the anguish churning in his head
When he and she were piloted to bed;
He wallowed back and forth in desperate style.
His ancient wife lay smiling all the while;
At last she said, “Bless us! Is this, my dear,
How knights and wives get on together here?
Are these the laws of good King Arthur’s house?
Are knights of his all so contemptuous?
I am your own beloved and your wife,
And I am she, indeed, that saved your life;
And certainly I never did you wrong.
Then why, this first of nights, so sad a song?
You’re carrying on as if you were half-witted.
Say, for God’s love, what sin have I committed?
I’ll put things right if you will tell me how.”

“Put right?” he cried. “That never can be now!
Nothing can ever be put right again!
You’re old, and so abominably plain,
So poor to start with, so low-bred to follow;
It’s little wonder if I twist and wallow!
God, that my heart would burst within my breast!”

“Is that,” said she, “the cause of your unrest?”

“Yes, certainly,” he said, “and can you wonder?”

“I could set right what you suppose a blunder,
That’s if I cared to, in a day or two,
If I were shown more courtesy by you.
Just now,” she said, “you spoke of gentle birth,
Such as descends from ancient wealth and worth.
If that’s the claim you make for gentlemen
Such arrogance is hardly worth a hen.
Whoever loves to work for virtuous ends,
To do what deeds of gentleness he can,
Christ wills we take our gentleness from Him,
Not from a wealth of ancestry long dim,
Though they bequeath their whole establishment
By which we claim to be of high descent.
Our fathers cannot make us a bequest
Of all those virtues that became them best
And earned for them the name of gentlemen,
But bade us follow them as best we can.

“Thus the wise poet of the Florentines,
Dante by name, has written in these lines,
For such is the opinion Dante launches:
‘Seldom arises by these slender branches
Prowess of men, for it is God, no less,
Wills us to claim of Him our gentleness.’
For of our parents nothing can we claim
Save temporal things, and these may hurt and maim.

“But everyone knows this as well as I;
For if gentility were implanted by
The natural course of lineage down the line,
Public or private, could it cease to shine
In doing the fair work of gentle deed?
No vice or villainy could then bear seed.

“Take fire and carry it to the darkest house
Between this kingdom and the Caucasus,
And shut the doors on it and leave it there,
It will burn on, and it will burn as fair
As if ten thousand men were there to see,
For fire will keep its nature and degree,
I can assure you, sir, until it dies.

“But gentleness, as you will recognize,
Is not annexed in nature to possessions.
Men fail in living up to their professions;
But fire never ceases to be fire.
God knows you’ll often find, if you enquire,
Some lording full of villainy and shame.
If you would be esteemed for the mere name
Of having been by birth a gentleman
And stemming from some virtuous, noble clan,
And do not live yourself by gentle deed
Or take your father’s noble code and creed,
You are no gentleman, though duke or earl.
Vice and bad manners are what make a churl.

“Gentility is only the renown
For bounty that your fathers handed down,
Quite foreign to your person, not your own;
Gentility must come from God alone.
That we are gentle comes to us by grace
And by no means is it bequeathed with place.

“Reflect how noble (says Valerius)
Was Tullius surnamed Hostilius,
Who rose from poverty to nobleness.
And read Boethius, Seneca no less,
Thus they express themselves and are agreed:
‘Gentle is he that does a gentle deed.’
And therefore, my dear husband, I conclude
That even if my ancestors were rude,
Yet God on high—and so I hope He will—
Can grant me grace to live in virtue still,
A gentlewoman only when beginning
To live in virtue and to shrink from sinning.

“As for my poverty which you reprove,
Almighty God Himself in whom we move,
Believe and have our being, chose a life
Of poverty, and every man or wife,
Nay, every child can see our Heavenly King
Would never stoop to choose a shameful thing.
No shame in poverty if the heart is gay,
As Seneca and all the learned say.
He who accepts his poverty unhurt
I’d say is rich although he lacked a shirt.
But truly poor are they who whine and fret
And covet what they cannot hope to get.
And he that, having nothing, covets not,
Is rich, though you may think he is a sot.

“True poverty can find a song to sing,
Juvenal says a pleasant little thing:
‘The poor can dance and sing in the relief
Of having nothing that will tempt a thief.’
Though it be hateful, poverty is good,
A great incentive to a livelihood,
And a great help to our capacity
For wisdom, if accepted patiently.

Poverty is, though wanting in estate,
A kind of wealth that none calumniate.
Poverty often, when the heart is lowly,
Brings one to God and teaches what is holy,
Gives knowledge of oneself and even lends
A glass by which to see one’s truest friends.
And since it’s no offense, let me be plain;
Do not rebuke my poverty again.

“Lastly you taxed me, sir, with being old.
Yet even if you never had been told
By ancient books, you gentlemen engage,
Yourselves in honor to respect old age.
To call an old man ‘father’ shows good breeding,
And this could be supported from my reading.

“You say I’m old and fouler than a fen.
You need not fear to be a cuckold, then.
Filth and old age, I’m sure you will agree,
Are powerful wardens over chastity.
Nevertheless, well knowing your delights,
I shall fulfil your worldly appetites.

“You have two choices; which one will you try?
To have me old and ugly till I die,
But still a loyal, true, and humble wife
That never will displease you all her life,
Or would you rather I were young and pretty

rebuke (ri-ˈbyok) v. to criticize

NARRATOR
In lines 285–394, the old woman offers a lengthy rebuttal to the knight’s complaints. Why might the narrator place her focus on the old woman and not the knight at this point in the story?
And chance your arm what happens in a city
Where friends will visit you because of me,
Yes, and in other places too, maybe.
Which would you have? The choice is all your own.”

The knight thought long, and with a piteous groan
At last he said, with all the care in life,
“My lady and my love, my dearest wife,
I leave the matter to your wise decision.
You make the choice yourself, for the provision
Of what may be agreeable and rich
In honor to us both, I don’t care which;
Whatever pleases you suffices me.”

“And have I won the mastery?” said she,
“Since I’m to choose and rule as I think fit?”
“Certainly, wife,” he answered her, “that’s it.”
“Kiss me,” she cried. “No quarrels! On my oath
And word of honor, you shall find me both,
That is, both fair and faithful as a wife;
May I go howling mad and take my life
Unless I prove to be as good and true
As ever wife was since the world was new!
And if tomorrow when the sun’s above
I seem less fair than any lady-love,
Than any queen or empress east or west,
Do with my life and death as you think best.
Cast up the curtain, husband. Look at me!”

And when indeed the knight had looked to see,
Lo, she was young and lovely, rich in charms.
In ecstasy he caught her in his arms,
His heart went bathing in a bath of blisses
And melted in a hundred thousand kisses,
And she responded in the fullest measure
With all that could delight or give him pleasure.

So they lived ever after to the end
In perfect bliss; and may Christ Jesus send
Us husbands meek and young and fresh in bed,
And grace to overbid them when we wed.
And—Jesu hear my prayer!—cut short the lives
Of those who won’t be governed by their wives;
And all old, angry niggards of their pence,
God send them soon a very pestilence!

Language Coach
Derivations The word pity (“sympathetic sorrow”) has several derivations, or related words, including pitiful, pitying, and piteous (line 404). Two derivations mean “causing pity,” one sometimes means “causing disgust,” and one means “having pity.” Match each derivation of pity to its definition.

NARRATOR
Reread the last paragraph. What is the Wife of Bath’s attitude toward husbands who are controlling or misers (“niggards”)? Cite the details that helped you draw this conclusion.
After Reading

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Describe the knight’s original sentence and his revised punishment.
2. **Recall** What agreement does the knight make with the old woman?
3. **Recall** What information does the old woman share with the knight?
4. **Summarize** In what ways does the relationship between the knight and the old woman change during the course of the story?

Text Analysis

5. **Examine Narrator** In her tale, the Wife of Bath offers direct statements on friars (lines 39–56), women’s desires (lines 101–126), and marriage (lines 433–440). Summarize each statement and then explain what each reveals about the Wife’s personality.

6. **Analyze Structure** Review the chart you created as you read. Unlike other pilgrims, the Wife of Bath interrupts her story with various personal comments, anecdotes, and illustrative stories. What might she be trying to convey about herself with this additional information?

7. **Evaluate Plot** Review lines 404–432. Is the conclusion of the story satisfying? In your response, consider the knight’s crime and the outcome of his actions.

8. **Make Judgments** The enduring appeal of *The Canterbury Tales* stems in part from Chaucer’s remarkable ability to match stories and storytellers. In what way is the Wife of Bath’s unusual tale well-suited to her personality? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

9. **Compare Texts** Compare the tales of the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath. Which character tells a better, more entertaining story? Cite evidence from both tales to support your opinion.

Text Criticism

10. **Social Context** Around 1185, Andreas Capellanus wrote *The Art of Courtly Love*. In this influential work, Capellanus states, “Love makes an ugly and rude person shine with all beauty, knows how to endow with nobility even one of humble birth, can even lend humility to the proud.” In what ways does “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” reflect Capellanus’s understanding of love and its transforming power?

**Do men UNDERSTAND women?**

Are male writers capable of portraying realistic female characters? How well do you think Chaucer portrayed the Wife of Bath? What would you change about his characterization of women?
Vocabulary in Context

**VOCABULARY PRACTICE**
Indicate whether the following pairs of words are synonyms or antonyms. Check your answers in a dictionary.

1. bequeath/inherit  
2. crone/maiden  
3. implore/beseech  
4. rebuke/praise  
5. sovereignty/rule  
6. temporal/eternal

**ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING**

How do the two parallel stories—the knight searching for love and the Wife of Bath’s role in the pilgrimage—share some of the same concepts about love and fidelity? Write a paragraph explaining how stories of those seeking love extend across cultures.

**VOCABULARY STRATEGY: THE LATIN ROOT temp**

The word *temporal* contains the root *temp*, from the Latin *tempus*, which means “time” or “a fixed period.” Something *temporal* exists in time and is not eternal. The same root is found in several other English words.

**PRACTICE** In each sentence below, choose the word from the pair in parentheses that correctly completes each sentence. Use your knowledge of word parts and the context in which the word appears to help you make the correct choice.

1. The scientist explained that the age of the dinosaurs was not (*extemporaneous, contemporaneous*) with human existence.
2. The band conductor suddenly increased the march’s (*tempo, temper*).
3. The senator (*contemporized, temporized*), hoping to delay the bill’s passage.
4. The brightly colored chart helped us (*temporalize, extemporize*) the different geological areas we were studying.
5. President Lyndon B. Johnson was both respected and feared by many of his (*contemporaries, templates*).
Language

◆ **GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Add Descriptive Details**

Review the *Grammar and Style* note on page 159. Chaucer was a keen observer who conveyed memorable details about characters through his use of similes.

Similes are figures of speech that use *like* or *as* to make a comparison. In the passage below, Chaucer conjures up a striking, if not complimentary, image of the balding Pardoner.

```
This Pardoner had hair *as yellow as wax*,
Hanging down smoothly *like a hank of flax*.
In driblets fell his locks behind his head
Down to his shoulders which they overspread;
Thinline they fell, *like rat-tails, one by one.* (lines 695–699)
```

Notice how each of the highlighted prepositions is followed by a concrete visual image. These similes greatly enrich Chaucer’s descriptions because they allow readers to form a vivid mental picture of a character.

**PRACTICE** Write sentences modeled on Chaucer’s work.

**EXAMPLE**

There was a *Franklin* with him, it appeared;
White as a daisy-petal was his beard.

There was a *puppy with him, it appeared;*
Stripped like a skunk, which seemed very weird.

1. His eyes would twinkle in his head as bright
   As any star upon a frosty night.
2. His prominent eyeballs never seemed to settle.
   They glittered like the flames beneath a kettle.

**READING-WRITING CONNECTION**

Expand your understanding of Chaucer’s characters by responding to this prompt. Then, use the **revising tips** to improve your dialogue.

**WRITING PROMPT** How might the other pilgrims have reacted to “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”? Write a dialogue in which at least two pilgrims, as well as the Wife of Bath herself, comment on the story and its message about men’s and women’s roles.

**REVISING TIPS**

- Add stage directions to describe each pilgrim’s tone of voice or body movements.
- Clearly identify each pilgrim’s opinion about men’s and women’s roles.