

Universal truths in
wife of bath by
geoffrey chaucer



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Question - The Wife of Bath tells anecdotes of her personal life. Does her tale also concern universal truths?

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a highly celebrated piece of British poetry of 14th century. A collection of 24 tales, it presents vivid and diverse characters, related to all classes of the society, all on a pilgrimage to the Canterbury, a major pilgrimage site in the medieval ages. Although all the characters are fictional, their tales are tantamount to social documents giving details about the societal conditions of that time. *Wife of Bath* is one of these fictional creations of Chaucer. Her prologue to her tale is the longest of all the prologues. She is an unabashed woman, who boasts of having been married five times and also having enjoyed sex with strangers. She blatantly presents anecdotes of her personal life and uses, from biblical texts to astrological symbols, to justify her actions and the consequent events. This paper attempts to analyse and elucidate whether her tale also concerns universal truths and in what manner.

Chaucer is coming in medieval age, when all knowledge was held within and propagated by the Church; everything was spiritual. Amusingly, Chaucer gives a contrasting image through his characters. *Wife of Bath* is undoubtedly a very controversial character, who, with all her pomp and show, overturns all the presumptions and expectations. She is presented, unlike the general notion of a delicate and refined woman, as a realistic and complicated woman who defends her life without trying to conceal its ruggedness.

While talking about her life, Wife of Bath certainly touches upon multiple issues of the society which can be considered universal truths, especially those regarding marriage and women. Wife of Bath, in the very first few lines of the prologue establishes that her rhetoric is largely based on experience when she says , “ Experience, though noon auctoritee Were in this world, is right y-nough for me”(lines 1-2)¹. It is thus incorrect to conclude that her words are equivalent to universal truths as experience is subjective while truth is objective. But, it is this very notion of objectivity and standards that the Wife of Bath questions through her harangue . She voices not only her opinions but also the opinions of her husbands. She, talks at length about the institution of marriage and the way society thwarts women in any and every way.

It is interesting to note that Wife of Bath is the only character in the book who is referred to by her filial relation rather than occupational standing in the society. It is a direct comment on the way a woman is seen and described in the society. Her identity is only a mere acknowledgement of whose wife, mother, sister or daughter she is, which is a universal truth. However, Wife of Bath emancipates herself from this social chain. She outrightly seeks her freedom as an individual, especially financial and sexual freedom, which women have been denied of, which is again a universal truth.

Her desires to seek financial freedom is very evident from her account of her first three husbands. All of them were rich and old. The characteristic factors, rich and old, worked suitably in her favour because as they were old, they would die sooner and she would directly inherit all their property and money.

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She very enterprisingly talks about how cunningly she would deceive them by constantly lecturing them using false arguments. She would tell them that in a drunken state they had lectured her about wives being full of folly, using her maid as the false witness (lines 245-249). Hearing this, they would feel guilty about the actions that they did not even commit and would try their best to gain favourable behaviour from her. It is very important to note that the very fact that her husbands are so easily deceived by the Wife of Bath is the indicative of the fact that the influential men of time had propagated the universal truth of wives never being good enough. John Bromyard, a 14th century English preacher, in his the Summa Predicantium, cited that - if a wife is sterile , the husband suffers from having no heir, if fecund, the family will make him poor; if she is fair, she will desire adornment and sometimes become unchaste, if ugly, it will be disagreeable to live with her² (lines 250-255). This is also pretty evident from her fifth husband, Jankin's words who constantly read her anecdotes out of a book which primarily dealt with troublesome wives (lines 715-790).

Also, the fact that she is adamant to ascertain her sexual freedom is time and again presented in the prologue. Especially when she says,

“ Myn housbond shal it have bothe eve and morwe,

Whan that him list com forth and paye his dette.

An housbonde I wol have, I won nat lette

Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral

And have his tribulacioun withal

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Upon his flessh, whyl that I am his wyf.

I have the power during al my lyf

Upon his propre body, and nocht he.” (lines 152 – 159)

In these lines, Wife of Bath quotes The Apostle Paul at the end, which said: “The womman hath not power of her bodi, but the husbonde; and the hosebonde hath not the power of his bodi but the womman” (Wyclif’s Bible, 1388). She emphasises on the latter part of the lines and very emphatically says that because she has agreed to marry the husband, he is indebted to her. He is her slave and she has the whole right over his body and to use it for her sexual gratification. This is very exemplary of the subversive nature of the text. Even though she misquotes the Bible to justify her words, this is simply an assertion of how the society only propagates the literal sense of the former lines of the Apostle, giving women absolutely no choice whatsoever over their sexuality. Thus, Wife of Bath in a way questions the normality of only men having such freedom over women, also essentially quoting from texts that propagate and substantiate such truths. Further it also states another universal truth which is the fact that texts like the Bible have been subjective to interpretations, all of which are not necessarily correct or incorrect.

Hence, it becomes interesting to delineate that even though, as earlier stated, Wife of Bath speaks on the basis of her subjective experience, yet her words reverberate the sound of universal truths, thus questioning their authority. Chaucer’s weaving of her character by using multiple threads in order to present her multifaceted personality presents the conflicted state of <https://assignbuster.com/universal-truths-in-wife-of-bath-by-geoffrey-chaucer/>

the society through her life. She is a complex, divided person, living in a society itself divided and shifting on questions that pertain to her. The Wife of Bath's Prologue is therefore a recognition of the self - destructiveness engendered by the misfit between religious and courtly ideals and the demands of everyday life. Thus, through her telling of anecdotes of her personal life, Wife of Bath, intrinsically concerns herself with the universal truths regarding women and marriage by both asserting and questioning them.