

### **Heilewif's Tale: Introductory Unit TAE**

This unit is designed to follow the novel when it is used as a summer reading between world history courses that break at the end of the Middle Ages. It will smooth the transition and introduce the second course by identifying and pursuing some continuing themes.

#### **On-going theme that emerges from the novel.**

European civilization is expanding, scientifically and economically, leading into Renaissance humanism and the later enlightenment as well as the age of exploration and commercial revolution.

**Medieval European civilization was dominated by strong communal values which students should be asked to think about and to evaluate. Ethics is about finding a balance between individual freedom and group responsibility. Human beings innately understand the need for both sides of this equation and are naturally urged to seek both. Extremes at either end usually result in unethical outcomes. The feudal system was skewed heavily toward group responsibility, to the point of smothering individual freedom. Students will readily see this and be critical of it since their own values tend to over-emphasize freedom.**

## Heilewif's Tale: Introductory Unit

All of the societies we have studied so far have held individual people responsible for their actions. In fact, we could say that ethics is about individual decision making. But, we have also seen big variations in how people look at what's right or wrong. Sometimes this difference comes from a disagreement over which is more important, the individual person or society as a whole. Heilewif's Tale was about a time in history when the good of the group was much more important than the good of any individual. This idea, called **communalism**, holds that what's best for the group is most important and ends up being what's best for each individual.

Before we get started, think about this issue. *Should you try to do what's best for the group you belong to even if it might not be, at least in the short run, what seems best for you as an individual?*

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**This question speaks directly to the most fundamental ethical question and should generate considerable discussion. The teacher should try to encourage as complete a consideration of the issue as possible.**

### Feudalism

After the fall of Rome, the rule of law disappeared, and Europe became a dangerous and lawless place. People naturally banded together and formed groups for their own protection. The land was divided into many small territories, which were defended by castles. Nobles and knights ruled, while peasants and serfs farmed the land. This so-called feudal system lasted for over a thousand years.

Feudalism's ideas of right and wrong were based on what would best hold together a strong group. We call this idea *communalism*. A commune is a group of people living together and sharing what they have.

In feudal society people freely agreed to be ruled by other people, and to do what they were told in return for protection. To seal these personal agreements, it was common to swear an oath of allegiance. The greatest crime that you could commit was to go back on your word, and not stand by your oath. This was called a felony. The word felony is still used today to describe the most serious crimes.

*Let's look at one of these feudal oaths.*

**I swear before God that I will be your true and faithful servant and be at your command. I will love what you love, and hate what you hate. I will not think or do anything of which you disapprove. In return you will stand by me, and protect me in**

**all the ways we agreed to at the time I submitted myself to your authority.**

Composite of several typical feudal oaths.

***An oath is like a promise to do something. How important is it to keep your promises? Should promises be kept no matter what?***

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It is important for students to continually consider this kind of question.

### **Thomas Aquinas**

During this feudal era, the Catholic Church was very strong, and most of the thinkers and writers were church people. One great philosopher who had a lot to say about right and wrong at that time was a Catholic priest named Thomas Aquinas. We're going to read some of his words, and talk about them because they show the philosophy behind communalism.

Here is how Aquinas put it:

**The parts of things exist for the sake of the whole. If a person had an infected finger, and it was threatening to spread and kill the person, then it would be right and good to cut it off. By the same reasoning, the person who is dangerous and infectious to the community can be rightfully killed to protect that community.**

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II,64 simplified

You can easily see how strong this idea of protecting the group was. *Think about the groups you belong to. How important are these groups to you? Write a short statement about groups in your life and prepare for a discussion.*

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One question that puzzled people who believed in communalism was whether a person should make a profit by selling something for more than it was worth. Here is what Aquinas said:

**It is wrong to sell a thing for more than its just price because it is deceiving and injuring your neighbor. Buying and selling is intended for the common advantage of both parties. Therefore there must be equality between them.**

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II,77 simplified

**The concept of “just price” will be difficult for some students to grasp. Some further explanation and examples may be helpful. The full impact of extreme group ethical standards should stand out for students.**

This is different isn't it? Let's look closer at what Aquinas said. First of all he uses the term *just price*. This term means the same thing as fair price. But what does that mean? Well, for people at that time, it meant that if you were selling something to make a living, you could set your price only as high as was necessary to pay your living expenses. In other words, you could expect to live comfortably at the level you were already at. You could not get rich by making big profits. For example, shoemakers had a certain lifestyle, as did carpenters and farmers and so did everyone else. You could sell your goods only at a price that kept you at that level. The just price would change with people and places, but it was always intended to keep people from moving up, or down, the social ladder.

**To sell anything for more than it is worth, or to buy anything for less than it is worth, is wrong and unlawful.**

**Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II,77**

*Compare this with the way trade is carried on today.*

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**Students should try to make value judgments about extreme positions on either end of the individualism-communalism scale.**

Thomas Aquinas had a lot to say about right and wrong. Let's see what he says about hypocrisy. Remember that hypocrites pretend to be something they're not.

**The seriousness of the wrong will depend on what end the hypocrite has in view. If the hypocrite intends to gain of from it at someone else's expense, it is very serious, but if the hypocrite just enjoys pretending then it's of lesser importance.**

**Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II,111,4**

Here again we see that intent played a big role in how actions were judged. *Let's think about this question again, maybe you've changed your opinion. Do you think that the reason why a person does something can determine if that action was right or wrong. For example, what if someone who was honestly trying to help a person injures the person? Or is it only the outcome of the action that counts?*

**It's important for students to have time to ponder and to repeatedly discuss these very difficult questions within changing circumstances.**

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This is a tough problem for ethics. Let's use this example. *Is it always wrong to lie? If not, what makes a lie not wrong? See if you can come up with a rule for when you can lie and when you can't. Then, apply it to some new situation to see if it works. Write your reasoning and conclusions in the space below.*

**Again, let the discussion go naturally. Students have to reach their own conclusions for ethical growth to occur.**

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## Renaissance

After about a thousand years of feudalism, people began to question some of its basic ideas. This new period in history is called the Renaissance. It was a time of change in the way people looked at their relationship with the community they lived in. Communalism was losing ground to the idea of individualism. Individualism stresses the importance of the individual people, and places them above the group. People began to believe that there was nothing wrong with striving to get things for themselves, and they became less concerned about their obligations to others.

The Renaissance was the beginning of what we call modern times. We still live in the modern age, and our society today still stresses individualism. So, this is a very important idea for us to study. It's a new way to look at life, and it changes things a lot.

All through the Middle Ages it was assumed that, for the most part at least, people try to do the right thing. In other words, people were by nature basically good. This was one idea that was seriously questioned by Renaissance thinkers. One famous philosopher at this time was an Italian named Nicolo Machiavelli. He wrote a book called **The Prince** which gave advice to political leaders. Let's see what Machiavelli said about the natural goodness of people.

**In general, people are ungrateful, unreliable, false, cowardly and greedy. They will promise you anything, and then turn their back on you if things go wrong. And don't think that the person who is closest to you is more reliable. Friendship is based on obligations, and people break obligations most easily.**

Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XVI simplified

*What to do you think? Are people basically good or basically bad? Is Machiavelli right?*  
**A wide variety of opinion will emerge. Students should reflect honestly on themselves.**

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Now, if you believe that people are the way Machiavelli says they are, your ideas about right and wrong will change.

Machiavelli wrote his book as a guide for the leader of his country. He believed that the government should not have to play by the same rules as ordinary people because the government cannot afford to lose. *Do you think governments should have the same standards of right and wrong as ordinary citizens? What about when governments deal with foreign countries?*

**This question should cause students to think more deeply about groups and group ethical standards. Students like to see themselves as free entities and often don't recognize they are not free of the dominant group.**

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Here is some of what Machiavelli wrote:

**Everyone says that the leader should be honest and trustworthy and not be sneaky. But it's easy to see that in the past leaders who get things done have paid little or no attention to this idea. They have simply outsmarted the others, especially those who keep their word. We all know that there are two ways of getting what you want. The first this through the rules, and the second is to take it by force. The leader must do both. The leader should be half lion and half fox. The lion can't see the traps, and the fox can't fight off the wolves. Great leaders don't rely on either one or the other, but use both. Therefore, the wise leaders do not keep their word if it will hurt them or prevent them from getting what they want.**

**If people were good this rule would not hold. But, because they are bad, and will lie and cheat you, you are not obligated to be fair and honest with them.**

**But, it is necessary to disguise your dishonesty and to pretend to be good. People like to think that they are upright, and they are very easy to trick. You must appear to be virtuous, but only a fool actually is virtuous. Pretend to be kind, reliable, fair, honest and loyal. But be ready to do the exact opposite, as long as you don't get caught. Its always best to stay with the good if you can, but only if it works, if not, you must be ready to change**

**tactics. Remember, people must believe you are virtuous, so never give any hint that you are not. People only see what you show them, not what's really there.**

Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XVIII simplified

*What was Machiavelli's opinion of hypocrisy?*

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It seems that winning is the most important thing for Machiavelli. *How important is winning in the things that you do? Does the urge to win sometimes lead to unethical actions? Can you give any examples from your own experiences?*

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Machiavelli seems different from earlier things, but there is a very basic way in which he is identical to all the others. Reread the following sentence. *See if you can figure it out? Why does he tell people to lie and cheat? What basic principle of ethics is he using?*

**If people were good this rule would not hold, but because they are bad, and will lie and cheat you, you are not obligated to be fair and honest with them.**

Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XVIII simplified

This is the negative side of the human drive to reach equality through reciprocity.

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## **My Coat of Arms**

Human beings naturally pursue self-interest through participation in groups. In so doing it is natural to cooperate with others to achieve individual success. While the ultimate end may be selfish, the preferred means is associative and cooperative, causing both individual and communal values to interact in every human ethical decision. Balancing freedom with group responsibility is a never-ending human ethical challenge. All humans have both self-regarding and other-regarding ethical urges and it is important for students to recognize this within themselves and in others. The following "Coat of Arms" strategy can be used to further compare the forces of both communalism and individualism in people's lives.

You will need poster board and markers for students to draw a conception of their family coat of arms. Allow a few minutes from several classes to complete the assignment after which each student will present and explain his or her Coat of Arms. Try to help the class analyze if the presenter is more inclined toward communalism or individualism in his or her basic ethical makeup. This will come through clearly in the way students answer the questions in the assignment. At the end present your own Coat of Arms and let the students analyze you. This assignment should segue smoothly into a study of the Renaissance.

## My Coat of Arms

Create your own heraldic shield. You must use pictures to tell the story. Only three words are allowed. The drawings may be simple as long as they mean something to you and you can explain them. Stress the quality of values it shows and don't be concerned with the quality of the artwork. Why pictures? Not only are pictures or symbols the traditional way of telling a story on heraldic shields, but the use of abstract symbols can force you to think beyond words to often hard to express values and beliefs.

**You must answer the following questions symbolically on your Coat of Arms.**

What do you regard to be your greatest personal achievement?

What do you regard to be your family's greatest achievement?

What is the one thing people can do to make you happy?

What do you regard to be your greatest personal weakness?

What would you do if you knew you had only one year to live?

What three words would you most like to have said about you?