

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“The Wife of Martin Guerre”

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CONTENTS

Areas of Study	Chapter	Topics Covered
Area of study 1- Reading and the study of texts	Chapter 1- Genre	-
	Chapter 2- Structure	-
	Chapter 3- Historical Issues	
	Chapter 4- Style	-
	Chapter 5- Background Notes	5.1 Feudalism 5.2 The Patriarchal System
	Chapter 6- Chapter Summaries	6.1 Part 1 Artigues 6.1.1 The Marriage p5-11 6.1.2 Bertrande comes to the Guerre household p14-17 6.1.3 Martin's first disobedience p17-22 6.1.4 Martin's disappearance p22-27 6.1.5 The years of absence p27-33 6.1.6 The return p33-40 6.1.7 The growing doubts p40-47 6.1.8 Certainty p47-54 6.1.9 The accusation p54-62 6.2 Part 2 Rieux 6.2.1 Witnesses 6.3 Part 3 Toulouse 6.3.1 The appeal p70-75 6.3.2 Self doubts p75-80 6.3.3 The second trial p80-end of Part 3
	Chapter 7- Character Profiles	7.1 Bertrande de Rols 7.2 Martin Guerre 7.3 Arnold du Tilh 7.4 Monsieur Guerre 7.5 Uncle Pierre
	Chapter 8- Themes and Issues	8.1 Authority and the individual 8.2 Deception 8.3 Identity 8.4 The role of religion in society 8.5 Marriage/family values/family honour 8.6 Truth or justice? 8.7 Types of justice 8.8 The place of women in society

	Chapter 9- Sample Essay Questions	9.1 Sample Part 1 Questions 9.2 Sample Part 2 Questions
	Chapter 10- Final Exam Tips	-

SAMPLE

AREA 1:

READING & THE STUDY OF TEXTS:

THE WIFE OF MARTIN GUERRE

Chapter 1 GENRE

Janet Lewis wrote several historical texts, and this text is the first of her books based on actual incidents which have been described in the work of Samuel Phillips' 'Famous Cases of Circumstantial Evidence.' It is fiction even though it is based on the trial of Arnaud du Tilh which concerned itself with a case of mistaken identity. The story is set in sixteen century France where people were generally pre-occupied with religion and the notion of punishment for committing sins – especially those perceived to be sins against the teachings of the Church – was one which was very difficult to come to terms with. As one would expect in a patriarchal society, women were considered to be the property of their families and they were often “sold off” to other families as wives in order to consolidate land ownership or bring families together for business purposes. It was the norm for arranged marriages to take place with children often being betrothed to their future partners almost from the time of their birth. In this text is important to note that the family property was always inherited by the male child and therefore the impostor is more readily accepted into the Guerre family as he is a viable alternative to having an unknown and distant relative take over the running of the family once M. Guerre, Martin's father dies. That is not to say that this is the only reason for his acceptance, but it is an important one nonetheless.

This text is multi generic. It is possible that this text may be considered to be an historical novel but, due to the fact that Lewis has embellished the basic truth of the trial, it would be more accurate to describe it as psychological fiction because it concentrates more on human feelings as well as the world behind these events. The text also raises social issues such as the role of women in society which can be carried forward to the role of women in the twenty-first century. It is also a love story of sorts where Bertrande finds that she must choose between the man whom she truly loves and her conscience or fear of punishment in the after life. The tale focuses on the role of authority of the Church and the family as well as the associated issues concerned with moral judgment. To summarise, the text is concerned with historical events and psychological issues, whilst at the same time it tells a of a somewhat twisted love story which raises social issues of the time whilst touching on the themes of justice and morality.

Chapter 2

STRUCTURE

This is a short text, with somewhat uneven chapters. There are three major episodes in the book with the structure reflecting this. The first 'Artigues' has two sub-sections – childhood and the disappearance of Martin; the second section deals with the return of Martin (Arnaud); 'Rieux' and 'Toulouse' deal with the two trials. The 'Afterword' is an addendum to the text which leaves the reader with a lot of unanswered questions to think about. The book is primarily about marriage in the 16th century, expectations, disappointments, disillusionment and an unusual notion of justice in a patriarchal society. The trials which are described come about largely due to Bertrande's inability to deal with her doubts about her husband and her upbringing according to the teachings of the Church. It is an unusual search for justice by twenty-first century standards which ends with the reader asking himself as to whether or not the justice she is so desperately seeking is in fact delivered.

Chapter 3

HISTORICAL ISSUES

This text highlights the dynamics of historical change. The reader is immediately plunged into the world of 16th century patriarchal France and all of the associated behaviours. This is achieved by the plausibility of the plot in that Lewis could, to an extent, be describing an event that one might read about in the newspaper today. The main problem is, however, getting the reader to accept that Bertrande really did believe that Arnaud could have been her long lost husband, and that she could have later felt so strongly that he was not. Bertrande de Rols is a woman caught in the traditional hierarchies and expectations of the society in which she lived. Arnold du Tilh, the impostor and her true love, is an individual whose world is not structured and governed by similar rules. He is rather a different psychological type, a modern man, and to all intents and purposes a rogue, because he is not controlled by the traditional values or his conscience. He is skilful, perceptive and resourceful in his relations with Bertrande and it seems that he fell in love with her and his newfound lifestyle in spite of himself. Eventually he is judged, however, by Bertrande, and the old values which she was born into which is what causes both his and her final downfall.