

from The Book of Margery Kempe

Autobiography by Margery Kempe



READING 2C Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical, social, and economic ideas of its time. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

DID YOU KNOW?

Margery Kempe . . .

- gave birth to 14 children.
- was ridiculed for dressing all in white when married women customarily wore dark clothing.
- so annoyed the archbishop of York that he paid a man five shillings to escort her out of town.

Meet the Author

Margery Kempe c. 1373–1439

The Book of Margery Kempe (kěmp), a religious mystic's story of her spiritual life, is thought to be the earliest surviving autobiography in the English language.

Ordinary Wife and Mother Margery Kempe was born about 1373 in Lynn—a town in the county of Norfolk, England—where her father served five terms as mayor. Although born to a prominent family, Kempe, like most women of her time, received little education. Around the age of 20, she married John Kempe, a tax collector, and raised a family.

Forsaking Secular Life At around the age of 40, Margery Kempe decided to become a “bride of Christ”—to live in chastity and preach to the world. As a vocal, outgoing speaker, she was quite an oddity at a time when most aspects of society, including the religious hierarchy, were controlled by men. Most women remained at home as wives and mothers. Any woman who wished to pursue a spiritual calling was expected to join a convent or to live as a recluse. Margery Kempe did neither.

Once Kempe had made her commitment to God, she began a series of religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Spain, Italy, and Germany. Although many men and women she

met considered her a model of human compassion and devotion, many others disapproved of her lifestyle.

A Gift of “Holy Tears” It was in Jerusalem that Kempe received her gift of “holy tears.” She would fall into violent fits of crying at unpredictable times throughout the rest of her life, often during church services. Both the clergy and the common people found her hysterical crying at best annoying, at worst heretical. As a result, Kempe encountered a good deal of persecution and ridicule, although she maintained that her tears were a special gift from God, a physical token of her special worth in his eyes.

Her Life Story In the 1430s, Kempe began dictating her life story to scribes (like most women of her class, she was illiterate). She began her narrative by describing a deeply troubling experience following the birth of her first child, which eventually led to her devotion to a spiritual life. Her memoir is important for several reasons. It serves as a sort of time capsule of life in the 1400s, preserving for the reader the social customs, speech, and attitudes of the day. It also reveals the singular character of Kempe herself, a woman of strong faith who lived by her convictions despite intense social criticism and opposition.



Author Online

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View of Jerusalem



● LITERARY ANALYSIS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Book of Margery Kempe is an **autobiography**, a writer's account of his or her own life. An autobiography, as opposed to a diary or a memoir, is a sustained narrative that attempts to make sense of a person's life. Most autobiographies are written in the first person, with a narrator who uses the pronoun *I*. Kempe's autobiography is highly unusual in that it is written in the third person, and Kempe is referred to as "she" or "this creature."

When this creature was twenty years of age, or somewhat more, she was married to a worshipful burgess [of Lynn] and was with child within a short time, as nature would have it.

This third-person narration may reflect the fact that Kempe dictated her story to a scribe, who did the actual writing, or it may reflect her desire to be humble. As you read her autobiography, notice how she explains events in her life and what her thoughts and experiences suggest about life in medieval times.

● READING SKILL: DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Kempe's autobiography requires you to read actively and draw conclusions about people and events. To **draw a conclusion** is to reach a judgment based on text evidence, experience, and reasoning. For example, if you read that a person answered a question hesitatingly and could not meet the questioner's eyes, you might conclude that the person was lying, based on these clues and your own knowledge of human behavior. As you read, use a chart to note details from the text about Margery Kempe's personality and beliefs, her illness, and the society she lives in. Note any additional thoughts you have about these subjects based on your own knowledge. Then after reading, draw conclusions about Kempe's life based on your chart.

	Evidence from Text	My Own Thoughts / Knowledge	Conclusions
Personality			
Beliefs			
Illness			
Society			

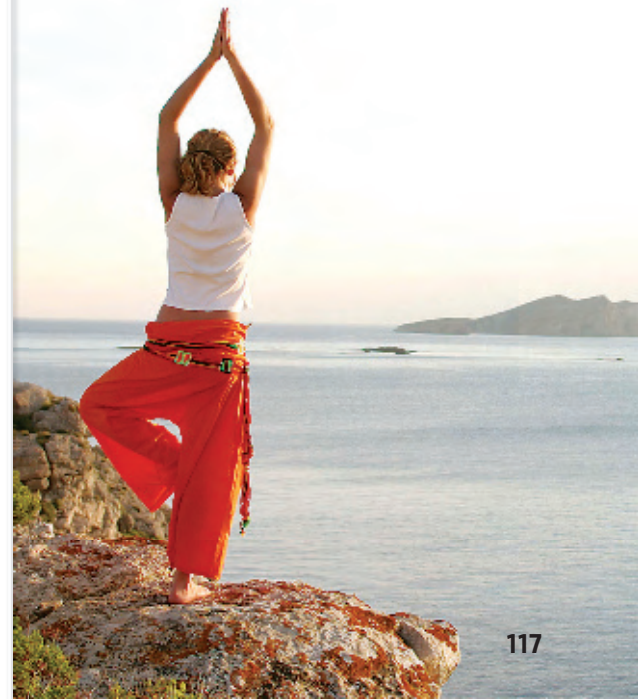


Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

Where do you find STRENGTH?

Margery Kempe didn't take the easy path in life. By living as a "bride of Christ" despite being a married woman, she challenged traditional women's roles and risked being branded as a heretic who could be burned at the stake. Her religious faith gave her the strength she needed to adhere to her convictions.

DISCUSS People have proved time and again that it is possible to overcome challenges, such as illness, poverty, physical disabilities, and oppression. With a group, discuss what gives people the strength to tackle a challenge or to keep going despite obstacles or setbacks. Draw from your own experiences or those of someone you know.



THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE

Margery Kempe

CHAPTER ONE: ILLNESS AND RECOVERY

When this creature was twenty years of age, or somewhat more, she was married to a worshipful burgess¹ [of Lynn] and was with child within a short time, as nature would have it. And after she had conceived, she was troubled with severe attacks of sickness until the child was born. And then, what with the labor-pains she had in childbirth and the sickness that had gone before, she despaired of her life, believing she might not live. Then she sent for her confessor,² for she had a thing on her conscience which she had never revealed before that time in all her life. For she was continually hindered by her enemy—the devil—always saying to her while she was in good health that she didn't need to confess but to do penance
10 by herself alone, and all should be forgiven, for God is merciful enough. And therefore this creature often did great penance in fasting on bread and water, and performed other acts of charity with devout prayers, but she would not reveal that one thing in confession. **A**

And when she was at any time sick or troubled, the devil said in her mind that she should be damned, for she was not shriven³ of that fault. Therefore, after her child was born, and not believing she would live, she sent for her confessor, as said before, fully wishing to be shriven of her whole lifetime, as near as she could. And when she came to the point of saying that thing which she had so long concealed, her confessor was a little too hasty and began sharply to reprove her
20 before she had fully said what she meant, and so she would say no more in spite of

Analyze Visuals ►

What details suggest that the woman pictured is convalescent?

A AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Notice what Kempe tells you about her life in lines 1–13. How does she view herself and her actions?

1. **burgess** (bûr'jîs): a citizen of an English town.

2. **confessor**: spiritual advisor; the priest to whom Margery confessed her sins.

3. **shriven**: absolved; forgiven for a sin or flaw.



anything he might do. And soon after, because of the dread she had of damnation on the one hand, and his sharp reproving of her on the other, this creature went out of her mind and was amazingly disturbed and tormented with spirits for half a year, eight weeks and odd days.

And in this time she saw, as she thought, devils opening their mouths all alight with burning flames of fire, as if they would have swallowed her in, sometimes pawing at her, sometimes threatening her, sometimes pulling her and hauling her about both night and day during the said time. And also the devils called out to her with great threats, and bade her that she should forsake her Christian faith
30 and belief, and deny her God, his mother, and all the saints in heaven, her good works and all good virtues, her father, her mother, and all her friends. And so she did. She slandered her husband, her friends, and her own self. She spoke many sharp and reproving words; she recognized no virtue nor goodness; she desired all wickedness; just as the spirits tempted her to say and do, so she said and did. She would have killed herself many a time as they stirred her to, and would have been

Language Coach

Formal Language The translator of Kempe's autobiography uses **formal language** different from our everyday speech. Reread lines 28–31, which include the words “the devils . . . bade her that she should forsake her Christian faith. . . .” How could you say this informally?



Light Entering Empty Room (1995). Tempera on panel. © James Lynch/Getty Images.

damned with them in hell, and in witness of this she bit her own hand so violently that the mark could be seen for the rest of her life. And also she pitilessly tore the skin on her body near her heart with her nails, for she had no other implement, and she would have done something worse, except that she was tied up and

40 forcibly restrained both day and night so that she could not do as she wanted. **B**

And when she had long been troubled by these and many other temptations, so that people thought she should never have escaped from them alive, then one time as she lay by herself and her keepers were not with her, our merciful Lord Christ Jesus—ever to be trusted, worshiped be his name, never forsaking his servant in time of need—appeared to his creature who had forsaken him, in the likeness of a man, the most seemly, most beauteous, and most amiable that ever might be seen with man’s eye, clad in a mantle of purple silk, sitting upon her bedside, looking upon her with so blessed a countenance that she was strengthened in all her spirits, and he said to her these words: “Daughter, why have you forsaken me, and

50 I never forsook you?” **C**

And as soon as he had said these words, she saw truly how the air opened as bright as any lightning, and he ascended up into the air, not hastily and quickly, but beautifully and gradually, so that she could clearly behold him in the air until it closed up again.

And presently the creature grew as calm in her wits and her reason as she ever was before, and asked her husband, as soon as he came to her, if she could have the keys of the buttery⁴ to get her food and drink as she had done before. Her maids and her keepers advised him that he should not deliver up any keys to her, for they said she would only give away such goods as there were, because she did

60 not know what she was saying, as they believed.

Nevertheless, her husband, who always had tenderness and compassion for her, ordered that they should give her the keys. And she took food and drink as her bodily strength would allow her, and she once again recognized her friends and her household, and everybody else who came to her in order to see how our Lord Jesus Christ had worked his grace in her—blessed may he be, who is ever near in tribulation.⁵ When people think he is far away from them he is very near through his grace. Afterwards this creature performed all her responsibilities wisely and soberly enough, except that she did not truly know our Lord’s power to draw us to him.⁶ **D**

B DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 25–40. What conclusions do you draw about the nature of Kempe’s illness?

C GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Notice how Kempe layers **subordinate clauses**, **participial phrases**, and **prepositional phrases** in a single-sentence paragraph to fully describe her vision of Jesus.

D AUTOBIOGRAPHY

How does Kempe conclude this first episode? How does she view herself at this point in her story?

4. **buttery**: pantry, where food provisions were stored.

5. **tribulation** (trīb’yə-lā’shən): suffering; distress.

6. **she did not . . . to him**: She still was not giving her complete devotion to God, as she would later.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why did Kempe send for a priest?
2. **Summarize** How did Kempe behave in the months after seeing the priest?
3. **Clarify** What changed her behavior?

Literary Analysis

4. **Examine Autobiography** What kind of person does Kempe present herself to be, and for what purpose? Support your answer with details from the text.
5. **Draw Conclusions** Review the chart you made as you read. What conclusions did you draw about each of the following?
 - Kempe's personality
 - Kempe's religious beliefs
 - Kempe's illness
 - English society in Kempe's time
6. **Interpret Theme** Kempe undergoes a transformation during her illness. What does this transformation symbolize?
7. **Compare Texts** What does this selection have in common with Bede's account of Caedmon (page 98)? What do the two selections suggest about Christian beliefs in England during early times?



READING 2C Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical, social, and economic ideas of its time. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

Literary Criticism

8. **Compare Texts** Readers are often divided in their reactions to *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Some feel that Kempe was mentally unstable and should not be taken seriously. Others see her as a strong-minded woman who insisted on the validity of her own spiritual life. Do you agree with either of these opinions, or do you see Kempe differently? Why?

Where do you find **STRENGTH**?

Kempe drew upon her faith to find strength. Favorite activities, people, or places can also serve as sources of strength in difficult times. What activity, person, or place serves as such a source of strength during difficult times for you or someone you know?

Conventions in Writing

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Craft Effective Sentences

Review the **Grammar and Style** note on page 121. Margery Kempe uses a series of **subordinate clauses**, **prepositional phrases**, and **participial phrases** to chronicle the harrowing experience of her illness and recovery. The single, lengthy sentence below is rich with details, spliced skillfully into the sentence, to vividly portray Kempe’s visions:

And in this time she saw, as she thought, devils opening their mouths all alight with burning flames of fire, as if they would have swallowed her in, sometimes pawing at her, sometimes threatening her, sometimes pulling her and hauling her about both night and day during the said time. (lines 25–28)

Notice how Kempe interjects the subordinate clause “as she thought” to alert readers to the important fact that she was hallucinating, without unduly interrupting the flow of her description. Two prepositional phrases—“with burning flames” and “of fire”—provide vivid sensory details of Kempe’s torment, as do the participial phrases she includes, such as “sometimes pawing at her” and “sometimes threatening her.”

PRACTICE Rewrite the following paragraph by incorporating subordinate clauses, prepositional phrases, and participial phrases that mimic Kempe’s style.

The doctor told me the bad news and handed me a pair of crutches. I was going to have to use them for six weeks. It would take that long for my knee to heal. The first day on crutches was agony. It took me 20 minutes to travel one block. I had to stop every few steps to catch my breath.

EXAMPLE

As the doctor told me the bad news, he put a pair of crutches in my hands.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Expand your understanding of the excerpt from *The Book of Margery Kempe* by responding to this prompt. Then, use the **revising tips** to improve your personal narrative.

WRITING PROMPT

WRITE A SURVIVAL TALE Think about a time when you or someone you know recovered from an injury, illness, or some other difficult experience. Draft a **one-page personal narrative** in which you describe the attitudes and strategies that made it survivable.

REVISING TIPS

- Ensure the story has a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- Add descriptive details to portray the experience.



WRITING 14A Write an engaging story with a well-developed conflict and resolution. **ORAL AND WRITTEN CONVENTIONS 17A** Use and understand the function of different types of clauses and phrases. **17B** Use a variety of correctly constructed sentences.

Interactive
Revision



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