The Merchant’s Prologue/Tale Reading Guide

*Please answer in complete sentences unless otherwise stated*

Prologue

1. What does the Merchant say about his own wife?

Tale

1. At age 60, what does January decide he wants to do?
2. According to Theophrastus, why is a servant preferable to a wife?
3. Why did God create women?
4. Why does January want a wife no older than 20?
5. Describe the woman (May) January finds to be his wife.
6. What happens at the wedding feast between May and Damian?
7. What are May’s feelings towards her new husband? How does she act on her wedding night?
8. What ailment suddenly befalls January and makes him jealous?
9. Read the excerpt from the myth of Pluto and Proserpina. How is this connected to the Merchant’s tale?
10. Why is it impossible for Damian and May to spend any time together?
11. How does May get into the pear tree? What happens while she is up there?
12. January regains his sight but doubts what he saw in the pear tree and ultimately forgivs May. Why?

Excerpt from The Myth of Pluto and Proserpina

Proserpine, daughter of Ceres, was playing with her companions in a forest filled with flowers, gathering lilies and violets, and filling her basket and her apron with them, when Ancient Pluto saw her from his chariot, loved her, and carried her off to the underworld to make her his bride.

Ceres sought her daughter all the world over. At length, weary and sad, she sat down upon a stone and continued sitting nine days and nights, in the open air, under the sunlight and moonlight and falling showers.

Ceres continued her search for her daughter, passing from land to land, and across seas and rivers, till at length she returned to Sicily, whence she at first set out, and stood by the banks of the River Cyane, where Pluto made himself a passage with his prize to his own dominions.

Seeing the girdle Proserpine had dropped beside the River Cyane, Ceres laid the blame on the innocent land for the loss of her daughter. "Ungrateful soil," said she, "which I have endowed with fertility and clothed with herbage and nourishing grain, No more shall you enjoy my favors" Then the cattle died, the plough broke in the furrow, the seed failed to come up; there was too much sun, there was too much rain; the birds stole the seeds, thistles and brambles were the only growth.”

Below in Tartarus, Proserpina appeared sad but showed no alarm in her countenance. Her look was such as became a queen, the queen of Erebus; the powerful bride of the monarch of the realms of the dead.

When Ceres heard this, she stood for a while like one stupefied; then turned her chariot towards heaven, and hastened to present herself before the throne of Jove. She told the story of her bereavement, and implored Jupiter to interfere to procure the restitution of her daughter. Jupiter consented on one condition, namely, that Proserpine should not during her stay in the lower world have taken any food; otherwise, the Fates forbade her release. Accordingly, Mercury was sent to demand Proserpine of Pluto. The monarch consented; but alas! the maiden had taken a pomegranate which Pluto offered her, and had sucked the sweet pulp from a few of the seeds. This was enough to prevent her complete release; but a compromise was made, by which she was to pass half the time with her mother, and the rest with her husband Pluto.

Ceres allowed herself to be pacified with this arrangement, and restored the earth to her favor. Thus, when Ceres roams the earth arm in arm with her daughter, the world celebrates in lush greenery and fertile crops. But when Proserpine descends again to rejoin her mate, her mother mourns, the earth freezes over, and all becomes brown and fallow.