World History Name:

Mrs. Barnes Date:

The Feudal System Block:

Source: William Manchester, *A World Lit Only By Fire*

Feudalism is a social, political, and economic system based on mutual protection and mutual obligation. Operating in a *quid pro quo* (Latin for, “this for that”) fashion, feudalism represents an arrangement between individuals and social classes. Oaths are sworn, responsibilities are established, and everyone contributes their “fair share.” As an institution, feudalism dominated much of Europe from the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE until the French Revolution in 1789, and in Russia until 1917. But the biggest question is “why?” What caused the creation of feudalism and what allowed it to continue to exist for over a thousand years?

Roman civilization, during both the Republic and the Empire, was centered upon law and order. Law codes and complex governmental structures ensured relative political stability throughout Rome. But, with the increasing threat of Germanic tribes, the promise that Rome once held as the beacon of civilizations disintegrated. Constant warfare with barbarians coupled with ineptitudes within the Empire ultimately led to its collapse. Without the protection and direction of the Empire, the people of Europe found themselves in a state of chaos. Most historians mark the fall of the Roman Empire with the beginning of the Dark Ages, or Middle Ages. This time period, characterized by violence and instability forced the peasants of Europe to find protection and security. Feudalism offered a solution; families and communities looked to their “warlords,” or land-owning men, for this much needed protection. In return, peasants, or s*erfs,* worked the tilled the land. Warlords, or more commonly *lords*, needed protection as well. To insure protection for himself, the lord sought to establish relationships with competent, loyal warriors. In return for their service, these warriors, or *knights*, received tracts of land from their lord called *fiefs.* Thus, in the feudal system, wealth and power were measured by amount of fertile land.

The loyal followers that protected the land for the lord were known as *vassals*. Lords and their vassals would cement their bond by participating in a two-part ceremony. The first part, known as *homage*, was based on the acknowledgment of the relationship that existed between the lord and his vassal. This relationship was symbolized by a kneeling vassal who, without his weapon, waited as his lord took out his own sword and tapped his vassal once on each shoulder and one on his head. The second part of the ceremony, known as *fealty*, was an oath of fidelity pledged by the vassal. In this promise of protection, the vassal received a small piece of sod symbolizing the tract of land promised to him by his lord.

The feudal relationship was based on inherent class distinctions and these distinctions would dominate society well into the sixteenth century. The highest class, made up of lords and kings, enjoyed all of the benefits that come with being on top. The “middle” class, made up of lords, vassals, and knights, were considered to be the aristocratic class. The term “knight,” which originally described farm workers of free birth, was not widely used until the 11th century. Used as a way to describe mounted warriors, knights officially became part of the social ladder by the twelfth century with the adoption of the chivalric code. This code came to designate a lifestyle for knights and was strictly adhered to by members of the knightly class. The soul of knighthood was fighting; power and freedom were acquired or maintained through warfare, and privileges were justified through warfare. The *Song of Roland*, a heroic poem detailing the wartime events from the eighth century, outlines the code of chivalry:

*To fear God and maintain His Church*

*To serve the liege lord in valor and faith*

*To protect the weak and defenseless*

*To give succor to widows and orphans*

*To refrain from the wanton giving of offence*

*To live by honor and for glory*

*To despise pencuniary reward*

*To fight for the welfare of all*

*To obey those placed in authority*

*To guard the honor of fellow knights*

*To eschew unfairness, meanness and deceit*

*To keep faith*

*At all time to speak the truth*

*To persevere to the end in any enterprise begun*

*To respect the honor of women*

*Never to refuse a challenge from an equal*

*Never to turn the back upon a foe*

As a *youth,* or a noble who was knighted but not yet married nor owned land, the ultimate goal was to attain land, a wife, and honor. Most medieval romances center around this plot; youths often killed older opponents and, as a reward, married his opponent’s wife, acquired his lands, and established his own house. This task was not as simple as it seems, however, for many in this class did not make it to full knighthood status.

Roughly 3-5% of the population during the Middle Ages was of noble birth. The rest of the people during the Middles Ages were considered c*ommoners*, meaning of non-noble birth. These *serfs*, or peasant farmers, were tied to the land on which they worked. This meant that serfs were often passed between lords and vassals upon any land transaction. The feudal economy was dominated by agriculture, and even though the serfs had no power or political standing in society, they were essential to the functioning of feudalism. Despite their vital role in the system, the lives of the serfs were violent and short.

With a life expectancy of only twenty-seven years, serfs toiled in the fields to provide food for their lords. Agricultural innovations gradually changed the work done by serfs, but their lives were dominated by tedious, backbreaking work. Simple plows were used in some locations to break up soils, but the heavy clay soil that dominated Northern Europe could only be cultivated by hand. While the men worked in the fields year-round, women were in charge of the domestic sphere: cooking, weaving, tending to the family’s meager garden, etc. Only during times of harvest would the entire family work in the fields. Their diets consisted of beans, bread, cabbage, cheese, and beer. Meat was a luxury as cattle and sheep were valuable to slaughter. Famine was a constant threat, and close living quarters coupled with poor sanitation allowed for widespread disease.

The agrarian villages of the Middle Ages represent a sharp regression from and deterioration of a once civilized society. Strong class divisions held for centuries, while innovation and change were virtually nonexistent. The appalling living conditions of the serfdom are exacerbated by the fact that mobility and improvement of status were incomprehensible. The average peasant travelled no further than eleven miles from his own hamlet in his or her lifetime. They were vastly illiterate, and while Christianity dominated the daily lives of the upper classes, peasants attempted to reconcile the beliefs of their superiors with their own superstitions of werewolves, witches, hobgoblins, vampires, and other evil spirits who lurked in the darkness. The communication that once allowed for complex and extensive empires to develop and survive was gone. Individuals were unimportant; most peasants lived and died with no sense of time and no sense of self.