

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

Book Basics

AUTHOR	Geoffrey Chaucer
YEARS WRITTEN	c. 1387–1400
GENRE	Satire
PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR	<i>The Canterbury Tales</i> begins in first-person point of view, as Chaucer the pilgrim—often thought of as a distinct character in the story rather than the author himself—relates the formation of the storytelling company. This first-person point of view reappears on occasion throughout the frame story of the tales. Prologues are mostly told in first person, from the perspective of the storyteller. The stories are typically in third person, except when the narrator interrupts.
TENSE	The stories of <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> are told primarily in the past tense.
ABOUT THE TITLE	A group of pilgrims is on its way to Canterbury Cathedral, and the pilgrims engage in a storytelling game on the road. The "tales" are their stories.

1) Author Biography

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London in the 1340s, though the exact date is not known. As a teenager he worked as a royal page. Later, as a diplomat, he traveled widely throughout Europe as an emissary for the king. These positions gave him the opportunity to meet people from all social classes and many different countries. He also became fluent in several languages, including French and Italian. *The Canterbury Tales*, with its diverse cast of characters and countless literary and historical allusions, reflects Chaucer's colorful background. Most of the tales are based, at least in part, on existing stories. But Chaucer broke new ground in *The Canterbury Tales*. As one of the first authors to write a complex literary work in English, he set a precedent that generations of other authors would follow. He established the use of pentameter, a verse line consisting of five 2-syllable units. After its publication, *The Canterbury Tales'* pentameter became the stock-in-trade of English verse for the next 500 years—in epic poetry, narrative poems, and the works of William Shakespeare (1564–1616). Furthermore, Chaucer was able to create distinct characters, all with their own voice and style, giving readers an overview of society across classes and occupations. Although none of Chaucer's original manuscript (written between 1387 and 1400) has survived, medieval scribes had copied various compilations of the work. These manuscripts, often beautifully illustrated, were popular even before the first printed version was published in 1478. By this time scholars agreed on Chaucer's brilliance in weaving together a rich tapestry of characters and genres. *The Canterbury Tales* is still considered one of the greatest works of English literature, and its popularity as a work that both entertains and teaches has not faded.

2) Full Characters' List

Chaucer	Chaucer is a pilgrim in the company and the narrator.
Harry Bailey	Harry Bailey, also called the "Host," is the owner of the Tabard Inn.
Knight	The Knight is a noble pilgrim recently back from the Crusades.
Miller	The Miller is a rude fellow who tells an insulting story about a carpenter.

Reeve	The Reeve shows his temper when he feels insulted.
Wife of Bath	The Wife of Bath is a seamstress from the town of Bath who has strong opinions about marriage.
Pardoner	The Pardoner sells indulgences for the Church but makes himself a tidy profit as well.
Cook	The Cook travels with several guildsmen, including a carpenter and a weaver.
Man of Law	The Man (Sergeant) of Law is a discreet lawyer who seems busier than he really is.
Shipman	The Shipman is a loud man who prefers a rousing tale to a sermon.
Monk	The Monk, an excellent hunter, prefers modern ways to traditional ones.
Prioress	Madame Eglantyne, whose elegance seems a little phony, is nevertheless an entertaining companion.
Nun's Priest	Sir John, a charming priest traveling with a nun, tells a merry fable.
Physician	The Physician makes good money as a doctor and keeps to a strict diet, but he neglects the Bible.
Friar	The Friar, who has many friends and pays special attention to the young ladies, is not above accepting a bribe or two.
Summoner	A man who brings sinners before the church for trial, the Summoner uses his position to extort the poor.
Clerk	The Clerk is a university student who prefers books to fine clothes and food.
Merchant	The Merchant has become wealthy and enjoys showing off his fine clothes and talking about his money.
Squire	The Squire is the Knight's son, a youthful and accomplished noble.
Franklin	The Franklin, a landowner but not a member of the nobility, lives for pleasure, especially the pleasures of food and drink.
Second Nun	The Second Nun, a pious woman devoted to Mary, regards idleness as a destructive force.
Canon	The Canon, who joins the company briefly before riding away and leaving his Yeoman, is an inept alchemist.
Canon's Yeoman	The Canon's Yeoman joins the company after his employer, an alchemist, abandons him for giving away professional secrets.
Manciple	The Manciple, who is in charge of purchasing food for an institution, has made more money than smarter men through shrewd investments.
Parson	The most devout clergyman in the group, the virtuous parson always puts others first and gives selflessly to the poor and suffering.

3) Plot Summary

The Canterbury Tales start with a prologue that frames, or sets the stage for, the tales that follow. Spring has come, and with it an increase in pilgrims traveling to Canterbury to visit the shrine of the martyred Saint Thomas Becket. A group of pilgrims assemble at the Tabard Inn just outside of London to start their journey. The Host of the Tabard Inn, a man named Harry Bailey, joins the company on the pilgrimage, as does a pilgrim named Chaucer. Harry Bailey suggests a tale-telling competition to help pass the time on the long road, and the company agrees. With the exception of Chaucer and Harry Bailey (who is often called simply the "Host"), none of the other pilgrims are named. Instead they are identified by their roles. The Knight tells the first tale. He recounts a long story about two knights who fall in love with the same woman. The men fight for her, and one wins her. However, he soon dies, and the other knight marries her instead. The Miller decides to tell the next story. It is a funny, crude story about an old carpenter who has a young wife. Two young men fall in love with her, and she conspires with one of them to meet for sex. On the night they meet, the other young man comes to her window, and in the dark he is tricked into kissing her bare behind. Most of the pilgrims enjoy this comical story, but the Reeve, a carpenter, is offended, so he pays the Miller back by telling a story about a dishonest

millar. In this story two students decide to make sure this dishonest miller does not steal any of the grain as it is being ground. In another middle-of-the-night mix-up, one of the students has sex with the miller's daughter, and the other has sex with the miller's wife. Next the Cook begins to tell a story of a young apprentice with a weakness for gambling, but the story remains unfinished. Harry Bailey, noting that the day is getting on, calls on the Man of Law, who then tells a story about Constance, daughter of the Roman emperor. She endures many hardships, but her people are converted to Christianity, and her son becomes emperor. The Wife of Bath then tells the company about her five husbands before beginning a story about a knight who is sentenced to death for rape. To avoid this fate, the knight must go on a quest to find the answer to a seemingly simple question: What do women want?

After the Wife of Bath ends her tale, the Friar tells a story about a dishonest summoner, who makes a deal with a fiend from Hell and ends up being taken there. The Summoner is enraged by the tale and tells two crude stories—one short and one long—about the treachery of friars.

To calm everyone down, Harry Bailey then asks the Clerk to tell a more lighthearted story. The Clerk's story focuses on a wife of unending patience and obedience to her husband. In response to this, the Merchant tells a story about an unfaithful young wife. Harry Bailey then calls on the Squire, who begins a story about a beautiful young woman whose magic ring allows her to understand the speech of animals. His story is cut short by the Franklin, who interrupts to wonder at the beauty of the Squire's storytelling skills. Rather than allowing the Squire's story to be completed, Harry Bailey asks the Franklin to tell his story. The Franklin tells about a faithful wife who is nearly—but not quite—tricked into unfaithfulness.

Next the Physician tells a tale about a beautiful young woman who must choose between death and dishonor. It is such a tragic story that Harry Bailey calls on the Pardoner for a happier one. The Pardoner tells a story about three young men who meet Death, and this is followed by the Shipman's tale of a merchant whose wife has an affair with a monk. Then the Prioress tells of a young boy who sings, miraculously, after he is dead.

Chaucer is called upon next, and after Harry Bailey interrupts his first tale because its rhymes are terrible, Chaucer tells a story that is more of a long argument about whether revenge should be taken to repay a violent act. The Monk then tells a long string of short stories about how powerful people are brought low, and this is followed by a fable about a rooster and a fox told by the Nun's Priest. The Second Nun then tells the story of Saint Cecilia, a Christian martyr.

The company of pilgrims meets two more travelers on the road, and one, a Yeoman, tells a story about a treacherous alchemist who tricks a priest into giving him money. Next the Manciple tells a tale about an unfaithful wife and a talking crow. After this, instead of a story, the Parson gives a sermon about sin and forgiveness. Finally, Chaucer apologizes for his work and asks forgiveness of anyone who is offended by his tales.

4) Plot Diagram

Introduction: Chaucer, Bailey, and pilgrims meet at the Tabard Inn.

Rising Action: 1. Riding to Canterbury, they have a story competition. 2. The Knight tells the first tale. 3. The Miller interrupts with the next tale.

Climax: As they ride, characters take turns telling their stories.

Falling Action: Near Canterbury, the Parson tells a final tale, a sermon.

Resolution: Chaucer prays for forgiveness for his less holy writings.

5) Themes

Love, Sex, and Fellowship

Throughout the frame story, character prologues, and tales, Chaucer explores human relationships. The tales discuss brotherly love and the betrayal of it, as well as the partnerships among thieves and rogues. The camaraderie and fellowship of the pilgrim company set the tone of the frame story. Most pilgrims complete their tales by directly addressing the listening company; in more than one case, a story creates friction between pilgrims. Male-female relationships feature prominently in *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer lived in a time when men held all political and religious power but women retained some financial power. For example, a woman could inherit her husband's wealth after he died—a custom that evidently benefited the Wife of Bath several times over. Women had the power of sex, as so many of the tales vividly illustrate. Sex within marriage, as well as outside of it, is a topic of several stories, with examples of both faithful and unfaithful wives and an ample dose of sexual trickery and bed hopping. Women also appear to have power in the realm of courtly love, as illustrated by the Knight's tale.

Social Class

The diverse social classes of the pilgrims are an important part of the Prologue. As Chaucer describes the pilgrims, he gives their occupations, and many are never known beyond these designations. At the time Chaucer wrote the tales, society was moving from the estate system to a system that included a growing middle class. There are pilgrims from every class in the company—both traditional and emerging. An example is the only member of the nobility, the Knight, who is treated as an honest and upright person, as is the poorest member of the clergy, the Parson. However, in some other incidents different members are different in standards as they belong to two different classes.

Story and Storyteller

The connection between story and storyteller is a crucial part of what makes *The Canterbury Tales* unique. The layer upon layer of storytelling involved is staggering and often hilarious. Geoffrey Chaucer is the author, yet Chaucer the pilgrim is the narrator, and while Geoffrey Chaucer's tales are excellent examples of narrative and poetry, Chaucer the pilgrim's poetry fails to satisfy, and his narrative is long and tedious. Most of the storytellers tell tales that match their personality or social status in some way. For example, the Second Nun tells a story about a virgin martyr; the Knight tells a romantic tale of love and battle; and the Wife of Bath, who has been married five times, tells a story about what women want.

Rivalry

The theme of rivalry is introduced by the storytelling competition, but this game is just one example of many rivalries in *The Canterbury Tales*. There are rivals in love, fighting for the same woman; storytellers who try to get back at or outdo one another in insults; and rivals in trickery who try to outsmart one another with their tricks. Although Harry Bailey intends the storytelling game to be friendly, many of the rivalries seem to bring out the worst in people. In the Knight's Tale, Palamon and Arcita, in competition for Emily, give up their bond of brotherhood and engage in violence as a result of their rivalry.

6) Symbols

Springtime and Flowers

Flowers, such as those that are embroidered on the Squire's clothing and those gathered by Emily in her garden, often symbolize the youth of the character. The imagery of spring seems appropriate for the Tales' frame story, a pilgrimage. Each of the pilgrims is traveling to Canterbury to seek (presumably) some spiritual renewal or benefit.

Blood

Blood is a metaphor for family lineage and, therefore, class. The noble knights Arcita and Palamon of the Knight's Tale are "Princes of the Royal Blood." It also signifies Christ's blood. Constance, in the story told by the Man of Law, prays for Christ's blood to protect her from evil. The blood of martyrs is also a religious symbol that is present in several tales, such as those of the Prioress and the Second Nun.

Clothing

Clothes, simple or elaborate, reflect the personality of the wearer. The Knight, for example, wears clothing stained with use, reflecting his humble attitude. The Squire's clothing is covered in the flowers that represent his freshness and youth.

7) Analyse and criticise the quotes

"When in April the sweet showers fall/And pierce the drought of March to the root/... Then people long to go on pilgrimages." — Chaucer , Prologue

.....
.....

"Well is it said that neither love nor power/Admit a rival, even for an hour." — Knight , The Knight's Tale

.....
.....

"Marriage is a misery and a woe." — Wife of Bath, The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

.....
.....

"People can die of mere imagination." — Miller , The Miller's Tale

.....
.....

"And if you take a wife into your bed/You're very likely to be cuckolded." — Merchant , The Merchant's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue

.....
.....

"Lovers must each be ready to obey/The other, if they would long keep company." — Franklin , The Franklin's Prologue and Tale

.....
.....
.....