

The Canterbury Tales

By Geoffrey Chaucer

1340?--1400

Geoffrey Chaucer

- *Completed during the third, mature phase of Chaucer's writing career, the end of 1300s.*
- *Written in English (Middle English) at a time when French remained the language of England's royal court and members of the English upper-class.*
- *Established the English literary tradition (future English authors would write in English, influenced by Chaucer's works).*
- *The Canterbury Tales begun about 1386 and was ever completed.*
- *The Prologue and 24 tales were completed*

The Basic Premise:

- *A group of religious pilgrims are making their way to the shrine of Saint Thomas á Becket, the martyred Archbishop of Canterbury who was assassinated in 1170 by knights of King Henry II.*
- *The shrine is the cathedral in Canterbury, 55 miles southeast of London, the scene of Becket's murder.*

The pilgrims (about 29 people) represent a cross-section of English society in Chaucer's time, with representatives of the three main social classes:

- *the aristocracy,*
- *the clergy,*
- *the common people (upper-, middle-, and lower- class commoners)*

The Basic Premise continued ...

- *The pilgrims become acquainted when they all stop for the night at The Tabard, an inn in Southwark, a London suburb at that time.*
- *Their host at the inn, Harry Bailey, urges them to travel together and decides to join them.*
- *To make the journey more entertaining, Bailey suggests each pilgrim tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back.*
- *Chaucer died before he was able to complete his tales.*

Facts of the Prologue

- *Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the pilgrims.*
- *According to the host, Harry Bailey, the pilgrim who tells the best story will be rewarded with a feast given by the other pilgrims.*
- *Bailey himself will be the sole judge of the storytelling competition.*
- *The next morning, the group sets out.*
- *The Knight tells the first tale ...*

Literary Structure in The Canterbury Tales

- *The Canterbury Tales is an example of a “frame tale” (numerous stories are found inside the “frame” of the basic premise).*
- *The Prologue serves to establish the “frame” and to introduce the various pilgrims.*
 - *The pilgrims are identified as to their vocations, backgrounds, and personalities.*
 - *Their physical descriptions are given, as well, so that the reader can see them clearly.*

What happens?

- *Each pilgrim who tells a story begins by saying a few words (or many words), revealing more about himself or herself.*
- *Following this introduction, the pilgrim tells their tale/story.*
- *In the complete collection, there are usually transitions that guide the reader from one character and his /her story to the next.*
- *The stories themselves reveal even more about the pilgrims who are telling them.*
- *The story reflects the character of the person choosing to tell it.*
When you read The Pardoner's Tale, you will see this!

The Canterbury Tales gives us . . .

- *A great understanding of English society at the time of Chaucer.*
- *Rich portraits of some very different kinds of people and the roles they play in society.*
- *Many insights into human nature—the good, the bad, and the ugly!*
- *And some really hilarious stories (some quite racy), along with other stories that are very instructive or full of adventure.*

Reading the Prologue ...

*To read The Prologue of the Canterbury Tales,
with its sharp characterizations,
rich descriptions, and engrossing stories,
is to spend time in 14th century England
and get a real feel for what life was like
during the days of Geoffrey Chaucer.*



Portrait of Chaucer as a Canterbury pilgrim, from the Ellesmere manuscript of The Canterbury Tales.