

# The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer

## The Canterbury Tales – Introduction



### [Baseline Information]

- Written in Middle English, over a period of years between 1386-1400
- Written by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400) (died before he could finish)
- Written in the London dialect of Middle English
- Copied in approximately 80 manuscripts
- Considered the greatest example of Middle English vernacular literature

### [Geoffrey Chaucer's Storytelling]

The ordinary man of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was apt to view his world as being old, sophisticated, and corrupt. New developments in the government and organization of society were replacing the crumbling feudal system. Kings and royalty were being supplanted by the new rich who had made vast fortunes out of the commercialism of trade and finance. The common people were beginning to stir and revolt. Corruption in the Church, the state, and in individual lives was the frequent target of satirical writers. Chief among these satirists was Geoffrey Chaucer, often called “the Father of English Literature.”

Chaucer was a polished courtier, statesman, professional man of letters, and man of the world. He, too, was well aware of the problems of his day; but satire was artistic. Chaucer never directly argues or preaches. He merely presents the corruption (the exaggerated pomp, the foolishness and rascality of the men and women of his age) and allows his readers to draw their own conclusions. Chaucer's satire is softened throughout by his humor, his awareness of beauty, and his cosmopolitan outlook.

In common with the Gawain-poet, Chaucer was a conscious artist. But he did not use the alliterative meter nor the Old English poetic diction of the romances. His meter and verse forms are borrowed from the French schools, and the some of the diction he used was that of the cultivated people of London.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer becomes the storyteller par excellence. With his emphasis on realism, he gives the whole work the character of a novel. Chaucer's greatness lies in his ability to portray character. For the most part, the stories he tells are not original. There are legends, love stories, adventures, satires, allegories and fables, all borrowed from the Italian, French, and English story collections, and from oral tradition. Chaucer's originality stems from his ability to tell the tales in masterly, brilliant versification (also called critical mimesis); the idea of the pilgrimage as a framework and a source of unity for his tales; and the vitality, vividness, and satiric humor that permeate both the stories and the characters of the story tellers.

In Chaucer's day, **pilgrimages** to various shrines were common. One of the journeys most frequently undertaken was to the shrine of **St. Thomas Becket**, Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been murdered during the reign of Henry II. It was the custom of pilgrims to gather at the **Tabard Inn** across the Thames River in what is now South London. Here they waited until a sufficient number came to make the journey pleasant and safe. Chaucer presents a group of 29 of these pilgrims in his *Canterbury Tales* and in the Prologue gives a description of each of them as they set out on their 60-mile, four-day pilgrimage.

### [Those Fancy Literary Terms]

#### Satire

In satire, human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or **shortcomings are held up to censure** by means of **ridicule**, derision, irony, or other similar methods, ideally with the intent to bring about improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, the purpose of satire is not primarily humor as much as an attack on something of which the author strongly disapproves, by using the weapon of wit. A very common, defining feature of satire is its strong vein of **irony** or **sarcasm**, but **parody**, exaggeration, juxtaposition, comparison, analogy, and *double entendre* are all frequently used in satirical speech and writing.

## The Frame-Narrative/ Frame Story

*The Canterbury Tales*, as a whole, fits into the genre of a “frame narrative,” a narrative technique whereby an introductory main story is composed, at least in part, for the purpose of organizing a set of shorter stories, each of which is a **story within a story**. The frame story leads readers from the first story into the smaller one within it. In the case of *The Canterbury Tales*, the frame story is a storytelling contest during a pilgrimage from the Tabard Inn in London to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral.

*The Canterbury Tales* is the most well-known and renowned “frame narrative” ever produced in the English language. Other famous frame narratives include: *One Thousand and One Nights*, in which the character Scheherazade narrates a set of fairy tales to the Sultan Shahriyar; Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, about a group of young aristocrats escaping the Black Death to the countryside and spending the time telling stories. In 1908, the critic G.G. Coulton had this to say about *The Canterbury Tales* as a frame-narrative:

Even more delightful than any of the tales told by Chaucer’s pilgrims is the tale which he tells us about them all: the story of their journey to Canterbury. Nowhere within so brief a compass can we realize either the life of the fourteenth century on one hand, or on the other the dramatic power in which Chaucer stands second only to Shakespeare among English poets. Forget for a while the separate tales of the pilgrims - - many of which were patched up by fits and starts during such broken leisure as this man of the world could afford for indulging his poetical fancies; while many others (like the Monk’s and the Parson’s) are tedious to modern readers in strict proportion to their dramatic propriety at the moment -- forget for once all but the Prologue and the end-links, and read these through at one sitting, from the first stirrup-cup at Southwark Tabard to that final crest of Harbledown where the weary look down at last upon the sacred city of their pilgrimage. There is no such story as this in all medieval literature; no such gallery of finished portraits, nor any drama so true both to life and to perfect art.

## The Metrical Tale

The metrical tale is a narrative poem in which a story is told as **simply** and **realistically** as possible. It may deal with any phase of life, and its theme may either be allegorical or literal. In many ways, the metrical tale may be compared to the modern short story, especially in its relative brevity and its unity of impression. Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, was a master of the metrical tale. Each of the metrical tales told in *The Canterbury Tales* falls into one of the **eleven genres** that were popular modes of storytelling in Chaucer’s day. Some tales fall into more than one category.

## [The Eleven Genres]

### (1) Estates Satire

“Estates” is the medieval way of referring to “class.” An estates satire is a survey of the three traditional “classes” of late medieval society: (1) those who fight; (2) those who pray; and (3) those who labor. Each class in *The Canterbury Tales* is represented by a group of figures. The knight and squire represent the nobility (those who fight). The monk and prioress represent the religious orders (those who pray). The Parson and Plowman are idealized types, shining examples of the pious, hardworking and dutiful lower orders (those who labor). Chaucer introduces two new classes that were gaining prominence in the 14<sup>th</sup> century: (1) the urban middle class (represented by the Franklin), and (2) the intellectuals (represented by the Man of Law and the Clerk). The “satire” aspect comes from the fact that all these characters are often figures of fun. They are there to be ridiculed, or censured, or, occasionally, admired. The general prologue, and the entire frame narrative, belongs to the genre of the estates satire.

### (2) Romance

Romances are substantial narratives about **high-born people**, set **far away** or **long ago**, or both. Their plots are concerned with love or chivalry, or both. The vast majority have happy endings, though the exceptions are some of the most famous – arguably *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Romances are not allegorical, but the more “courtly” ones are concerned to express some kind of inner meaning, often related to the highest human ideals. These ideals are likely to be compatible with Christianity, but most romances are primarily secular in focus.

### (3) Fabliau

Taken from the French tradition, a fabliau is a brief **comic** tale in verse, usually **scurrilous** and often **obscene**. The style is simple, vigorous, and straightforward; the time is the present, and the settings real, familiar places. The characters are ordinary sorts -- tradesmen, peasants, priests, students, restless wives. The plots are realistically motivated tricks and ruses. The fabliau thus presents a **lively image of everyday life** among the middle and lower classes. Whereas romance looks to ideals and idealized love, the fabliau is concerned more with cunning and folly than virtue and evil. Above all, it is funny.

#### (4) Exemplum

An exemplum is a **moral anecdote**, brief or extended, real or fictitious, used to illustrate a point. Exempla helped medieval preachers to adorn their sermons, to emphasize moral conclusions or illustrate a point of doctrine. The subject matter could be taken from fables, folktales, legends or real history. The exemplum is similar to the "cautionary tale," a traditional story told in folklore to warn its hearer of a danger. There are three essential parts to a cautionary tale, though they can be introduced in a large variety of ways. First, a taboo or prohibition is stated: some act, location, or thing is said to be dangerous. Then, the narrative itself is told: someone disregarded the warning and performed the forbidden act. Finally, the violator comes to an unpleasant fate, which is frequently related in large and grisly detail.

#### (5) Folktale

The **motifs of promise and of testing** are inseparable from the plot. Typically, the hero or heroine faces many obstacles en route to accomplishing some task and is usually reduced to helplessness before the climax. Folktales typically conclude "short and sweet:" Everything is resolved — the heroes and heroines are happy, and the villains are punished.

#### (6) Breton Lai

The Breton lai is a form of medieval romance literature often involving **supernatural** and **fairy-world** Celtic motifs. It is more likely to recount a single episode or group of related episodes in a single setting. It also tends to focus much more on emotion than on event. Its primary interest is in the internal life of its characters. **Magic** is commonplace, and characters often act by an ethic oblique to the norms of Christianity. It is called a Breton lai, because it was the type of tale popular with the Breton minstrels.

#### (7) Miracle Story

Miracles of the **Virgin** stories had been widespread across Europe as an expression of popular piety throughout the Middle Ages, and from early twelfth century they were gathered into collections. The stories were written as aids to piety rather than as historical record.

#### (8) Tragedy

The monk describes tragedies – in the medieval sense -- as that which "beware the story of a **fall from prosperity** in order that we might beware the **strokes of Fortune**."

#### (9) Beast Fable

A beast fable is a traditional form of **allegorical narrative** with a **moral** in which talking **animals** stand in some kind of exemplary relationship to humans. They are traditionally concerned with practical homely wisdom.

#### (10) Treatise

A systematic exposition or argument in writing including a **methodical discussion** of the facts and principles involved and conclusions reached about a single subject, such as the Parson's discourse on penitence.

#### (11) Hagiography

Hagiography is simple the story of the **life of a saint**, recounting the extraordinary virtue exhibited by the main character.

### [Synopsis of the Frame-Narrative]

In the beauty of April, the Narrator and 29 oddly assorted travelers happen to meet at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, London. This becomes the launching point for their 60-mile, four-day religious journey to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at the Cathedral in Canterbury. Great blessing and forgiveness were for those who made the pilgrimage; relics of the saint were enshrined there, and miracles had been reported by those who prayed before the shrine. Chaucer's pilgrims, however, are not all traveling for religious reasons. Many of them simply enjoy social contact or the adventure of travel.

As the travelers are becoming acquainted, their Host, the innkeeper, Harry Bailley, decides to join them. He suggests that they pass the time along the way by telling stories. Each pilgrim is to tell four stories - two on the way to Canterbury, and two on the return trip - a total of 120 stories. He will supply and dedicate a dinner at the end of the trip to the one who tells the best tale. The framework is thus laid out for the organization of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer, the narrator, observes all of the characters as they are arriving and getting acquainted. He describes, in detail, most of the travelers, which represent a cross-section of 14<sup>th</sup>-century English society. All levels are represented, beginning with the Knight, who is

the highest-ranking character socially. Several levels of holiness and authority in the clergy are among the pilgrims while the majority of the characters are drawn from the middle-class. A small number of the peasant-class are also making the journey, most of them as servants to other pilgrims.

As the travelers begin their journey the next morning, they draw straws to see who will tell the first tale. The Knight draws the shortest straw. He begins the storytelling with a long romantic epic about two brave young knights who both fall in love with the same woman and who spend years attempting to win her love.

Everyone enjoys the tale and they agree that the trip is off to an excellent start. When the Host invites the Monk to tell a story to match the Knight's, the Miller, who is drunk, becomes so rude and insistent that he be allowed to go next that the Host allows it. The Miller's tale is indeed very funny, involving several tricks and a very dirty prank as a young wife conspires with her lover to make love to him right under her husband's nose.

The Miller's fabliau upsets the Reeve because it involves an aging carpenter, and the Reeve himself is aging and was formerly a carpenter. Insulted by the Miller, the Reeve retaliates with a tale about a miller who is made a fool of in very much the same manner as the carpenter in the preceding rendition.

After the Reeve, the Cook speaks up and begins to tell another humorous adventure about a thieving, womanizing young apprentice. Chaucer did not finish writing this story; it stops almost at the beginning.

When the dialogue among the travelers resumes, the morning is half gone and the Host, Harry Bailley, urges the Man of Law to begin his entry quickly. Being a lawyer, the Man of Law is very long-winded and relates a very long story about the life of a noblewoman named Constance who suffers patiently and virtuously through a great many terrible trials. In the end she is rewarded for her perseverance.

The Man of Law's recital, though lengthy, has pleased the other pilgrims very much. Harry Bailley then calls upon the Parson to tell a similar tale of goodness; but the Shipman, who wants to hear no more sermonizing, says he will take his turn next and will tell a merry story without a hint of preaching. Indeed, his story involves a lovely wife who outsmarts her husband to get money for a new dress.

Evidently looking for contrast in subject matter, the Host next invites the Prioress to give them a story. Graciously, she relates a short legend about a little schoolboy who is martyred and through whose death a miracle takes place.

After hearing this miraculous narrative, all of the travelers become very subdued, so the Host calls upon the Narrator (Chaucer) to liven things up. Slyly making fun of the Host's literary pretensions, Chaucer recites a brilliant parody on knighthood composed in low rhyme. Harry hates Chaucer's poem and interrupts to complain; again, in jest, Chaucer tells a long, boring version of an ancient myth. However, the Host is very impressed by the serious moral tone of this inferior tale and is highly complimentary.

Since the myth just told involved a wise and patient wife, Harry Bailley takes this opportunity to criticize his own shrewish wife. He then digresses further with a brief commentary on monks which leads him to call upon the pilgrim Monk for his contribution to the entertainment.

The Monk belies his fun-loving appearance by giving a disappointing recital about famous figures who are brought low by fate. The Monk's subject is so dreary that the Knight stops him, and the Host berates him for lowering the morale of the party. When the Monk refuses to change his tone, the Nun's Priest accepts the Host's request for a happier tale. The Priest renders the wonderful fable of Chanticleer, a proud rooster taken in by the flattery of a clever fox.

Harry Bailley is wildly enthusiastic about the Priest's tale, turning very bawdy in his praise. The earthy Wife of Bath is chosen as the next participant, probably because the Host suspects that she will continue in the same bawdy vein. However, the Wife turns out to be quite a philosopher, prefacing her tale with a long discourse on marriage. When she does tell her tale, it is about the marriage of a young and virile knight to an ancient hag.

When the Wife has concluded, the Friar announces that he will tell a worthy tale about a summoner. He adds that everyone knows there is nothing good to say about summoners and tells a story which proves his point.

Infuriated by the Friar's insulting tale, the Summoner first tells a terrible joke about friars and then a story which condemns them, too. His rendering is quite coarse and dirty. Hoping for something more uplifting next, the Host gives the Cleric his chance, reminding the young scholar not to be too scholarly and to put in some adventure. Obliging, the Cleric entertains with his tale of the cruel Walter of Saluzzo who tested his poor wife unmercifully.

The Cleric's tale reminds the Merchant of his own unhappy marriage and his story reflects his state. It is yet another tale of a bold, unfaithful wife in a marriage with a much older man

When the Merchant has finished, Harry Bailley again interjects complaints about his own domineering wife, but then requests a love story of the Squire. The young man begins an exotic tale that promises to be a fine romance, but Chaucer did not complete this story, so it is left unfinished.

The dialogue resumes with the Franklin complimenting the Squire and trying to imitate his eloquence with an ancient lyric of romance. There is no conversation among the pilgrims before the Physician's tale. His story is set in ancient Rome and concerns a young virgin who prefers death to dishonor.

The Host has really taken the Physician's sad story to heart and begs the Pardoner to lift his spirits with a happier tale. However, the other pilgrims want something more instructive, so the Pardoner obliges. After revealing himself to be a very wicked man, the Pardoner instructs the company with an allegory about vice leading three young men to their deaths. When he is finished, the Pardoner tries to sell his fake relics to his fellow travelers, but the Host prevents him, insulting and angering him in the process. The Knight has to intervene to restore peace.

The Second Nun then tells the moral and inspiring life of St. Cecelia. About five miles later, a Canon and his Yeoman join the party, having ridden madly to catch up. Conversation reveals these men to be outlaws of sorts, but they are made welcome and invited to participate in the storytelling all the same.

When the Canon's Yeoman reveals their underhanded business, the Canon rides off in a fit of anger, and the Canon's Yeoman relates a tale about a cheating alchemist, really a disclosure about the Canon.

It is late afternoon by the time the Yeoman finishes and the Cook has become so drunk that he falls off his horse. There is an angry interchange between the Cook and the Manciple, and the Cook has to be placated with more wine. The Manciple then tells his story, which is based on an ancient myth and explains why the crow is black.

At sundown the Manciple ends his story. The Host suggests that the Parson conclude the day of tale-telling with a fable. However, the Parson preaches a two-hour sermon on penitence instead. The Canterbury Tales end here.