CHAUCER

Chaucer (1340?...1400)

It was, in fact, Chaucer who was the real founder of English poetry, and he is rightly called the 'Father of English Poetry'. Unlike the poetry of his predecessors and contemporaries, which is read by few except professed scholars, Chaucer’s poetry has been read and enjoyed continuously from his own day to this, and the greatest of his successors, from Spenser and Milton to Tennyson and William Morris, have joined in praising it. Chaucer, in fact, made a fresh beginning in English literature. He disregarded altogether the old English tradition. His education as a poet was two-fold. Part of it came from French and Italian literatures, but part of it came from life. He was not a mere bookman, nor was he in the least a visionary. Like Shakespeare and Milton, he was, on the contrary, a man of the world and of affairs.

The most famous and characteristic work of Chaucer is the *Canterbury Tales*, which is a collection of stories related by the pilgrims on their way to the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury. These pilgrims represent different sections of contemporary English society, and in the description of the most prominent of these people in the *Prologue* Chaucer's powers are shown at their very highest. All these characters are individualized, yet their thoroughly typical quality gives unique value to Chaucer’s picture of men and manners in the England of his time.

The *Canterbury Tales* is a landmark in the history of English poetry because here Chaucer enriched the English language and metre to such an extent, that now it could be conveniently used for any purpose. Moreover, by introducing a variety of highly-finished characters into a single action, and engaging them in an animated dialogue, Chaucer fulfilled every requirement of the dramatist, short of bringing his plays on the stage. Also, by drawing finished and various portraits in verse, he showed the way to the novelists to portray characters.

Chaucer's works fall into three periods. During the first period he imitated French models, particularly the famous and very long poem *Le Roman de la Rose* of which he made a translation—*Romaunt of the Rose*. This poem which gives an intimate introduction to the medieval French romances and allegories of courtly love, is the embryo out of which all Chaucer's poetry grows. During this period he also wrote the *Book of the Duchess*, an elegy, which in its form and nature is like the *Romaunt of the Rose*; *Complaint unto Pity*, a shorter poem and ABC, a series of stanzas religious in tone, in which each opens with a letter of the alphabet in order.
The poems of the second period (1373-84) show the influence of Italian literature, especially of Dante’s Divine Comedy and Boccaccio’s poems. In this period he wrote The Parliament of Fowls, which contains very dramatic and satiric dialogues between the assembled birds; Troilus and Criseyde, which narrates the story of the Trojan prince Troilus and his love for a damsel, Creseida; The Story of Griselda, in which is given a pitiful picture of womanhood; and The House of Fame, which is a masterpiece of comic fantasy, with a graver undertone of contemplation of human folly.

Chaucer’s third period (1384-90) may be called the English period, because in it he threw off foreign influences and showed native originality. In the Legend of Good Woman he employed for the first time the heroic couplet. It was during this period that he wrote The Canterbury Tales, his greatest poetic achievement, which places us in the heart of London. Here we find his gentle, kindly humour, which is Chaucer’s greatest quality, at its very best.

Chaucer’s importance in the development of English literature is very great because he removed poetry from the region of Metaphysics and Theology, and made it hold as “twere the mirror up to nature”. He thus brought back the old classical principle of the direct imitation of nature.

(f) Chaucer’s Successors

After Chaucer there was a decline in English poetry for about one hundred years. The years from 1400 to the Renaissance were a period bereft of literature. There were only a few minor poets, the imitators and successors of Chaucer, who are called the English and Scottish Chaucerians who wrote during this period. The main cause of the decline of literature during this period was that no writer of genius was born during those long years. Chaucer’s successors were Hoccleve, Lydgate, Hawes, Skelton Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas. They all did little but copy him, and they represent on era of mediocrity in English literature that continues up to the time of the Renaissance.

Canterbury Tales Characteristics

The Knight

Social Status: Ruling class: highest among the pilgrims

Dress: “he possessed fine horses but was not gaily dressed”

wore a dark, Fustian tunic (coarse cloth) that had armor stains
Physical Characteristics: He is strong because he has endured many battles. He is middle aged because he has a 20 year old son, the squire.

Personality Traits: wise, modest, distinguished, chivalrous, truthful, honorable, generous, courteous, brave loves action and adventure, believes in the ideals of chivalry, he must be an excellent fighter to have survived so many battles all over Europe.

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage?

To give thanks to God “to do his pilgrimage and render thanks”

**The Squire**

Social Status: Ruling class: the son of the knight.

Dress: “embroidered like a meadow bright, etc. (dressed in red and white) His gown was short, sleeves long and wide.

Physical Characteristics: curly hair, about 20 years old, average height, strong Physically fit, sings and plays the flute, likes poetry, jousting, horse riding, dancing.

Personality Traits: he fought on behalf of a lady and did well quickly, lover, respectful to his father, hard working and willing to take risks.

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? Maybe out of respect for this father.

**The Yeoman**

Social Status: peasant class, servant who accompanies the knight and squire.

Dress: coat and hood of green with peacock-feather arrows at his belt, held a bow sword and dagger – also a hunting horn Wore saucy bracelet as shield guard from the bow and sword along with St. Christopher’s medal.

Physical Characteristics: head like a nut and brown faced, strong Knew the whole of woodcraft up and down.
Personality: The artist rendition suggests the yeoman is ready for any occurrence in the forest, such as hunting game or defense against highwayman attack. He looks sturdy and serious and like Robin Hood.

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? He is accompanying the knight and squire.

**The Prioress**

Social Status: clergy (wealthy) – she is a nun

Dress: veil, graceful cloak, jewelry (prayer bracelet) that indicates wealth and worldliness

Physical Characteristics: not undergrown, elegant nose, gray eyes, small, red mouth, wide forehead, Personality Traits: Simple and coy (shy), neat, clean, clingy, helpless Charitable, sympathetic, sentimental, tender-hearted (too much so)

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? She is a nun so a spiritual trip seems likely.

**The Monk**

Social Status: clergy (wealthy)

Dress: wealthy, fine fur-trimmed robe, gold brooch

Physical Characteristics: bald, fat Personality Traits: Hunter has greyhounds, and hunting shoes with spurs, personable he eats well he likes to eat

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? He is a priest but his mission is probably more self indulgent than spiritual.

**The Friar**

Social Status: clergy (wealthy)

Dress: had a long hanging hood, white, thick neck, rich cape like a Pope

Physical Characteristics: He sang well and played the hurdy-gurdy stringed instrument and the harp
Personality Traits: “Glib with gallant phrase and well turned speech” (He is very Persuasive at talking women and wealthy landowners into giving him money in exchange for listening to confessions “an easy man in penance giving” What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? He is a priest but his intentions are dishonest – to make money off selling blessings

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? He is a priest but his intentions are dishonest – to make money off selling blessings

The Merchant

Social Status: part of a wealthy trade class of fur traders and cloth

Dress: motley (multi color) dress, wore Flemish beaver hat, daintily buckled boots Physical Characteristics: forking beard, stately, noble in appearance “high on his horse he sat”

Personality Traits: Expert at currency exchange but personally in debt

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? Perhaps he hopes to sell some of his furs and cloths

The Oxford Cleric

Social Status: Middle Class Student of Philosophy

Dress: “Thread on his overcoat was bare” his clothes are rags

Physical Characteristics: Slender, hollow look, a sober stare (serious)
Personality Traits: Studious, read a lot, spent all his money on books, not social

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? He seeks morality and virtue...“The thought of moral virtue filled his speech”

The Man of Law

Social Status: Middle class lawyer appointed by the King

Dress: Homely parti-colored coat, pin striped belt

Physical Characteristics: Not stated – see personality traits

Personality Traits: Wise, cautious, accurate, knowledgeable in all laws
What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? To uphold justice

**The Franklin**

Social Status: middle class - man of leisure

Dress: had a dagger and white purse

Physical Characteristics: White beard,

Personality Traits: Confident, cheerful, lived for pleasure

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? To enjoy himself

**The Tradesmen**

Social Status: Trade class – group who appear as a unit

Dress: Stylishly dressed Their gear was trim and fresh, knives wrought with purest silver

Physical Characteristics: Proud men who represented their guild (their group of craftsmen – they are the new emerging middle class

Personality Traits: Seemed like worthy members of a legislative body

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? To represent their group of upcoming craftsmen

**The Cook**

Social Status: trade class cook

Dress: unknown

Physical Characteristics: sore on leg

Personality Traits: servant to craftsmen, good cook, good sense of taste

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? To cook for the group of upcoming craftsmen

**The Skipper/Shipman**

Social Status: peasant class - a veteran sailor
Dress: Woolen gown that reach his knee, dagger hanging from his neck

Physical Characteristics: Tan, bearded

Personality Traits: A rascal who he steals wine, he is hardy, he is a skilled navigator but ruthless but ruthless with enemies, able to withstand hardship, careful planner

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? He is well traveled, so he perhaps he wants to continue his travels...

**The Doctor**

Social Status: Middle Class

Dress: Blood-red garments slashed with bluish-gray, lone with taffeta (silk)

Personality Traits: Well spoken, excellent knowledge of middle ages medical tricks And remedies based more on medieval practices like blood-letting Well connected to local apothecaries who profited like the doctor

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? Maybe to make money in case someone gets sick

**The Wife of Bath**

Social Status: middle class seamstress

Dress: kerciefs finely woven, red hose, new shoes

Physical Characteristics: somewhat deaf, red faced but handsome, gapped teeth, large hips

Personality Traits: bold, argumentative, well traveled, professional wife

Very social

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? Maybe to meet another husband.

**The Parson**

Social Status: Clergy

Dress: modest/poor
Personality Traits: Holy, virtuous, hard working church man who disliked extorting tithe (taxes paid to church), gave from the church offerings to the poor, he practices what he preaches

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? To help others find salvation

**The Plowman**

Social Status: peasant, the parson’s good-hearted brother

Dress: Wore a loose jacket smock, rode a mare

Personality Traits: Honest worker, good and true, loves God and neighbors, helpful to the poor, pays tithes to the church

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? To accompany his brother, the parson, to praise God

**The Miller**

Social Status: trade class worker who uses equipment to make flour

Dress: Sword and buckler (shield) at his side, wore a blue hood and white coat

Physical Characteristics: Stout - weighed 224 pounds, big, brawny red beard, wart on his nose

Personality Traits: Wrestler, steals grain, a loud, bad storytelling clown, plays bagpipes

**The Manciple**

Social Status: Trade Class – provider of provisions for a college or court or monastery

Dress: clothing suitable for a trade class that buys supplies for elite groups

Personality Traits: Uneducated but clever, smarter than those he feeds

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? He serves food to monasteries so perhaps he wants to serve himself with salvation

**The Reeve**
Social Status: Middle class steward responsible for running the everyday affairs of a feudal manor

Dress: long overcoat of bluish gray, rusty blade

Physical Characteristics: Old, thin, close shaven, legs like sticks, probably frail

Personality Traits: Feared like the plague by serfs and herdsmen - those beneath him, Knowledgeable in his job

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? Perhaps he seeks forgiveness for stealing from his master and creating fear in those who worked for him.

The Summoner

Social Status: clergy - An official who brings persons accused of violating Church law to court

Dress: He wore a garland on his head

Physical Characteristics: Has leprosy - disgusting red baby face with pus-filled pimples, narrow eyes, black scabby brows and thin beard

Personality Traits: He is a drunk, lecherous, ill-tempered, smelled of garlic and onions

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? Maybe to drink and chase women

The Pardoner

Social Status: clergy - pardons people’s sins for a donation to the church

Dress: Carries a bag full of fake religious relics, no hood but a little cap on head Bulging eyeballs, has cross on his wallet, pilgrim medal on hat

Physical Characteristics: long, greasy yellow hair, beardless

Personality Traits: Greedy fraud, shifty, keeps money from blessings to himself, Sneaky, untrustworthy, dishonest, he read and sang sermons well
What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? To make money in exchange for forgiving pilgrims for their sins

**The Host (Harry Bailey)**

Social Status: trade class - the leader of the group

Physical Characteristics: large, striking in appearance, manly, bright eyed
Personality Traits: Loud and merry but quick tempered, bold, tactful, Generous, curious

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? To accompany the pilgrims on their journey and select the one who tells the best story who will be rewarded with a free supper

**Ruling Class**: knight, squire

**Clergy**: monk, friar, prioress, parson, summoner, pardoner

**Middle Class**: Franklin, Reeve, doctor, oxford student, wife of Bath, sergeant at law

**Trade Class**: guildsmen, cook, miller, host, manciple, merchant.

**Peasants**: skipper, plowman, yeoman

The action begins at a tavern just outside of London, circa 1390, where a group of pilgrims have gathered in preparation for their journey to visit the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The narrator, Chaucer, encounters them there and becomes one of their company. Chaucer describes all of the pilgrims in delightful, and often grotesque, detail.

The pilgrims go to dinner, during which the owner of the tavern, or Host, makes a proposal to the group: on the way to Canterbury, says the Host, each pilgrim will tell two tales, followed by two on the way back. The Host will accompany the group and serve as a judge of their tales. The pilgrim who tells the best tale wins a free dinner at the tavern at the journey's end. Should anyone question the Host's judgment, moreover, he has to foot the bill for the entire pilgrimage. The pilgrims, eager to have fun on their journey, quickly agree to the Host's proposal and swear oaths to abide by the rules of the game. After a bit of shut-eye, they ride out of Canterbury the
next morning and the tale-telling begins.

Almost immediately, a pilgrim challenges the Host’s authority. After the first tale, the Host asks the Monk to tell a tale, but the drunken Miller interrupts him and announces that he will speak next or leave the company. It’s certainly not the last time the Host’s orderly vision for the game is challenged: drunken pilgrims, mysterious strangers, and, most importantly, the conflicts between some of the members of the company threaten to derail the game at many points in the course of the journey.

The pilgrims tell lots of different kinds of tales on their journey: comedies and tragedies, romances and dirty stories, and sermons and saints' lives, to name a few. Some pilgrims tell stories where a character with another pilgrim’s occupation is humiliated in the course of the tale, which leads to trouble. The Miller, for example, tells a tale about a carpenter whose wife not only commits adultery with a clerk, but humiliates him in front of the whole town. The real carpenter among the pilgrims takes this very personally, and proceeds to tell a tale where a miller suffers humiliation at the hands of some students. A similar rivalry occurs between the Friar and the Summoner. All the while, the Host alternates between trying to make peace between the pilgrims and creating more conflict with his gentle and not-so-gentle teasing of members of the party.

*The Canterbury Tales* end after only 24 tales, a far cry short of the planned 120. We never get to see the pilgrims reach Canterbury, nor do we learn who wins the competition. It’s likely that Chaucer ran out of time or energy. He may have planned to revise the beginning of the frame story so that the 24 tales would seem complete. In any case, *The Canterbury Tales* as we know them end with the Parson’s sermon on sin and repentance, followed by Chaucer’s retraction.

**GENERAL PROLOGUE**

- The General Prologue begins with a description of how April's showers cause flowers to bloom, crops to grow, birds to sing, and people to want to make pilgrimages – journeys to holy places. In England, people especially like to go to Canterbury to pray at the shrine of a holy saint who healed them when they were sick.
The narrator tells how, in that season, he is at a tavern in Southwark getting ready to make his pilgrimage to Canterbury. There, he meets a large group of pilgrims, also going to Canterbury. Soon, he has spoken with each of them and has become a member of their group, or 'felaweshipe.'

The narrator describes the appearance and behavior of all of the pilgrims in great detail. (For a detailed description of each of the character's portraits, see the 'Characters' section.)

The narrator concludes his description of the pilgrims with his promise to describe what happens to them that evening and on their pilgrimage. He asks the reader's forgiveness if he gives offense, claiming as his excuse his obligation to repeat the pilgrim's words and deeds exactly, even if they are rude.

The host serves dinner.

The narrator describes the host. (For a detailed description of the Host's portrait, see the "Characters" section.)

The Host praises the group of pilgrims as being the most merry he's seen in a long time. He expresses his desire to "do them mirth," or make them happy. He tells the pilgrims that, if they agree to do as he says, they will have lots of fun on their way to Canterbury.

The pilgrims confer amongst themselves and quickly agree to do as the host says.

The host proposes that each pilgrim tell two tales on the way to Canterbury, and two on the way back. Whoever tells the best tale as judged by the Host wins a free dinner when they arrive back at his tavern. Whoever expresses disagreement with the Host's judgment has to pay for the entire cost of the pilgrimage.

The pilgrims swear oaths to abide by the rules of the game, and to submit to the authority of the Host.

The pilgrims go to bed.

In the morning, the Host wakes the pilgrims and they start down the road.

At the watering hole of Saint Thomas, the Host reminds the pilgrims of their agreement and proposes that they draw straws to decide who goes first.

The Knight draws the shortest straw, and so begins the tale-telling contest.

THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE

After the Knight's tale has concluded, the narrator describes the very favorable reaction of the pilgrims to the tale.
The Host announces that, now, the game has truly begun. He asks the Monk to tell the next tale.

The Miller, who is drunk, yells out that he knows a noble tale with which he will "quite," or top, the Knight's tale.

The Host tells the Miller that another pilgrim will tell a tale first.

The Miller says that he will tell his tale, or else leave the fellowship.

The Host grudgingly agrees to let the Miller tell his tale first.

The Miller announces that he is drunk, and asks the other pilgrims to forgive him if he misspeaks, for it is really the fault of the ale of Southwark.

The Miller announces his intention to tell a story about a carpenter and his wife, and how a clerk makes a fool of the carpenter.

The Reeve (a.k.a. carpenter) tells the Miller to shut up, and that it's a sin to insult another, and to speak ill of wives.

The Miller tells the Reeve that the only people who don't get "cuckolded" (cheated on) are those who don't have wives. However, he says, surely the Reeve is not a cuckold, for there are also many good wives.

The Miller says that he has a wife, but he's certainly not naïve enough to believe that she hasn't cheated on him. Furthermore, a husband shouldn't inquire too deeply into the affairs of God, or of his wife.

The narrator breaks in again to tell how the Miller won't stop talking and tells a very "churlish" – or "low-born fellow's" tale. He tells his audience not to blame him if they are offended, for it is his duty simply to "reherce," or repeat, everything exactly as it happened. If the readers don't want to hear a churlish tale, they can turn the page and find many other more "noble" stories, as well as moral and holy tales. And furthermore, says the narrator, people should not "maken earnest of game," or take too seriously what is meant to be all in fun.

THE Reeve'S PROLOGUE

The narrator describes the hilarity that ensues after the Miller's tale, with the whole company laughing and playing, except for the Reeve. The Reeve is offended because he is a carpenter and takes the Miller's tale as a personal insult.

The Reeve declares that he can "quite," or top, the Miller's tale with a story about how a miller gets tricked, were it not for the fact that he is too old to engage in the kind of sexual joking he has in mind for his tale.
The Reeve elaborates upon how old he is, using various metaphors to describe old age. He describes himself as a horse that is confined to the stable, and a rotten fruit.

The problem with being old, says the Reeve, is that like a green onion, you have a white head (i.e., an old, feeble body) but a green tail (you're horny all the time). Though your body's not up to it, you constantly want sex.

The four powers of the elderly, says the Reeve, are boasting, lying, anger, and covetousness.

As soon as he was born, says the Reeve, "death drew the tap of life and let it run" – i.e., his time began to run out. Like beer in a barrel, the Reeve's life is now at the bottom – almost over.

All that is left to the elderly, according to the Reeve, is to talk about the wretched things that happened before. All they have to look forward to now is old age.

The Host interrupts the Reeve to complain that the Reeve is preaching, which is not the proper activity for a Reeve. He remarks that much time has passed, and that it's time for the Reeve to begin his tale.

The Reeve asks the other pilgrims to forgive him if he offends them, but he's got to answer the Miller's tale with a similar kind of tale.

The Reeve expresses his belief that the Miller told his tale about a foolish carpenter out of scorn for him, the Reeve. Now the Reeve promises to "top" him in his own, churlish, or low-born, terms.

THE COOK’S PROLOGUE

The Cook enjoys the Reeve's tale so much that he feels as good as if the Reeve was scratching his back.

The Cook draws a moral from the Reeve's tale, based upon a Proverb from the Bible: not to bring strangers into one's home, for lodging people at night is dangerous.

The Cook declares he has never heard of a miller better tricked than the one in the Reeve's tale.

The Cook announces his intention to tell a tale about a funny thing that happened in his city.

The Host agrees to this, but cautions him to make sure his tale is good.

The Host accuses the Cook of various dishonest cooking practices, including draining gravy from his meat pies to make them last longer, selling old meat pies, giving pilgrims food poisoning, and keeping an unclean kitchen.
The Host concludes his jabs at the Cook by claiming he’s just joking and asking the Cook not to be angry.

The Cook declares that the Host speaks the truth, and therefore his joke is not a good one. Therefore, he promises he will tell a tale about a Host before the pilgrimage is over, although not right now.

INTRODUCTION TO THE MAN OF LAW’S TALE

The Host concludes from the position of the sun and the length of the shadows on the ground that it is ten o’clock in the morning. Worried that the pilgrims are losing time which, as he says, quoting from the ancient Greek philosopher Seneca, can never be regained, he urges the pilgrims not to remain idle, but to continue their game.

The Host asks the Man of Law to tell a tale.

The Man of Law says that although he has no wish to break with the rules of the game, he knows no suitable tale that Chaucer (the narrator) has not already told.

The Man of Law lists Chaucer’s works, saying that if he hasn’t told a tale in one work, he’s certainly told it in another. He’s told more tales of lovers than Ovid, such as the tale of Ceyx and Alcion. He’s written the *Legends of Good Women*, where one can read about many famous women abandoned by their lovers.

The Man of Law concludes that, although Chaucer has written many tales about women, he’s certainly never written about a woman named Canacee, who loved her own brother, nor of Appollonius of Tyre, who raped his own daughter. These stories are horrible, says the Man of Law, and he has no intention to tell stories like that.

The Man of Law decides to get around the problem of being compared to Chaucer by telling his tale in prose, and leaving the verses to Chaucer. He then proceeds to tell a tale in verse.

WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE

At this point, the Wife of Bath delivers a long, proto-feminist (or anti-feminist, depending on your point of view) diatribe. (For more about this, see Shmoop’s guides to the "Wife of Bath’s Prologue" and the "Wife of Bath’s Tale.")

THE FRIAR’S PROLOGUE

The narrator tells us that the Friar always glares at the Summoner.

The Friar praises the Wife of Bath for speaking about matters that are debated in the Universities, but says that the pilgrims only need to
speak about fun things, "game," and leave the preaching to the authorities.

- The Friar promises to tell a tale about a summoner.
- The Friar describes a summoner as someone who runs around calling people before the court for fornication (sex outside of marriage) and gets beaten at the end of every town.
- The Host rebukes the Friar, saying that a man of his "estate," or social class, should be polite and courteous, and that, in the fellowship of pilgrims, there should be no debate. Therefore the Friar should just tell his tale, and leave the Summoner alone.
- The Summoner tells the Host to let the Friar say whatever he wants, for when it's his turn to speak, he will top the Friar. Speaking sarcastically, the Summoner says he will tell what a great honor it is to be a Friar, and many other such crimes.
- The Host cries for peace, and asks the Friar to tell his tale.

THE SUMMONER'S PROLOGUE

- The Summoner is so angered by the Friar's tale that he stands up in his stirrups shaking like an aspen leaf.
- He tells the company he desires only one thing: to be allowed to tale his tale.
- The Summoner says that the Friar boasts he knows hell and that is no wonder: friars and devils are never apart.
- The Summoner tells a story-within-a-story about a friar:
  - The story begins with a friar who dreams that an angel guides him through hell.
  - This friar is surprised that in his tour of hell, he sees no friars, and asks the angel whether friars have so much grace that they don't go to hell.
  - The angel replies that there are millions of friars in hell, and leads the friar to Satan.
  - The angel asks Satan to lift his huge tail, and there, in his anus, swarm friars like bees in a hive, coming and going, nestling in Satan's "ers."
  - The friar wakes from his vision, but after that he quakes for fear, always having Satan's "ers" in his mind.
- The Summoner ends his story about the friar by saying that this is the heritage of Friars.
- The Summoner declares this the end of his prologue, and begins his tale.

THE CLERK'S PROLOGUE
The Host remarks to the Clerk that he's been awfully quiet on this journey, so much so that the Host suspects he's studying, when now is really not the time.

The Host tells the Clerk to be more cheerful, and tell them a merry tale (and not a sermon), something about adventures. The Clerk should not speak in scholarly language, but in plain terms the whole company can understand.

The Clerk answers that he respects the Host's authority, and will certainly obey him by telling a tale that he learned from a clerk in Padua called Francis Petrarch.

The Clerk says that Petrarch wrote great poetry that illuminated Italy, but that death took him, as it does everyone.

The Clerk says that Petrarch wrote a prologue to his tale in which he described its setting. The Clerk, however, thinks this prologue unnecessary, and so launches right into his tale.

**MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE**

- The Merchant says that everyone who has a wife, including him, endures much weeping, wailing, and sorrow.
- The Merchant describes his wife as a shrew, a woman who could outmatch Satan if she were married to him. The Clerk's story about a patient wife named Grisilde has made him think about the huge difference between Grisilde and his own wife.
- If he could do it again, says the Merchant, he would never get married, for married men have great sorrow and trouble, as all wedded men know.
- The Merchant tells the Host that he has been married for only two months.
- The Merchant says that, even if a wifeless man was stabbed, he could never tell as sad a story as the Merchant can about how awful his wife is.
- The Host tells the Merchant to put his money where his mouth is and tell the story already, since he clearly knows so much about it.
- The Merchant says he will gladly tell his story, but it's not about his own sorrow in marriage.

**MERCHANT'S EPILOGUE**

- The Host deplores the wife from the Merchant's story, and asks God to keep him away from such a wife.
- The Host says that women are always lying and trying to deceive men, as the Merchant's tale proves.
• The Host tells the company that he has a wife, although a poor one, and one who is a blabbermouth shrew with many vices.
• The Host expresses his unhappiness at being married to her, she has so many vices.
• However, he says he will not enumerate all her vices because he is afraid someone in the company will tell her, since women are so good at discovering such things. Also, he fears his wit is not sufficient to do so.

THE SQUIRE'S INTRODUCTION

• The Host asks the Squire to tell a tale about love, for certainly the Squire knows as much about love as any man.
• The Squire replies that he does not know much about love, but he will tell a tale because he does not wish to rebel against the Host's authority.

FRANKLIN'S INTERRUPTION

• The Franklin interrupts the Squire's tale, saying that he has spoken very well considering his youth. In fact, he thinks that no one in the company could match the Squire in eloquence.
• The Franklin expresses his wish that his own son be as great a man as the Squire. Instead, his son gambles and spends all his money, and would rather talk with servants than gentlemen from whom he could learn proper behavior.
• The Host interrupts this exchange to remind the Franklin that everyone must tell a tale.
• The Franklin asks the Host to excuse him for speaking a few words to the Squire, and announces his intention to tell a tale he hopes will be good enough for the Host.

PARDONER'S INTRODUCTION

• The Host, very much moved by the injustice described in the Physician's tale, draws a moral from it: that the gifts of Fortune and Nature cause many creatures to die, and often do more harm than good.
• The Host tells the Physician his tale is very sad, and asks God's blessing upon the Physician and all his instruments.
- The Host says that, unless he gets a piece of cake or some beer, or hears a merry tale, his heart will break for sadness.
- The Host asks the Pardoner to tell a tale of happiness or jokes.
- The Pardoner agrees, but says that first he will stop at a tavern by the roadside to eat cake and drink beer.
- The nobles in the company, afraid that the Pardoner's ingestion of alcohol will cause him to tell an R-rated tale, object and ask the Pardoner to speak about virtue and not sex.
- The Pardoner agrees, but says he must consider such a tale while he drinks.

**THEMES**

**LITERATURE AND WRITING**

Since *The Canterbury Tales* are all about a tale-telling competition, it makes sense that a huge concern of this story would be literature and, more specifically, what makes for good literature. Is the best tale really one that both delights and instructs? Or is it enough for a tale to simply tickle the funny bone? Is it better to speak in poetry or prose? To repeat a story exactly as you heard it, or to improvise and add your own special touch? These are the questions that *The Canterbury Tales* explore not only by having characters ask them directly, but also by providing a huge range of different kinds of stories, from high-class romance to bawdy fabliau, saints' lives to sinners' stories, adventures to sermons. The contrast of the stories, the combinations of tellers and tales, and the presence of interludes between the tales in which characters reflect upon what they've just heard provide an extremely innovative way of exploring (although not really ever answering) million-dollar questions about the value and purpose of literature.

**COMPETITION**

*The Canterbury Tales* are about a tale-telling competition in which pilgrims engage on their way to Canterbury. This competition is supposed to be friendly, but it becomes the opposite of that when some of the professional competition between the pilgrims overshadows the tale-telling one. This leads to a contrast in the *Tales* between "good" and "bad" kinds of competition, and to questions about the pros and cons of competition and the ways in which it can both enhance and destroy fellowship. The kinds of competition in which the pilgrims engage, moreover, from jousts to wrestling matches to singing contests, can tell us important information about their characters.
SOCIETY AND CLASS

Since Chaucer sets *The Canterbury Tales* at a time of economic transition in England, in which new mercantile and artisan classes are shaking things up for the more traditional “estates” of those who pray, those who fight, and those who work (clerics, nobles, serfs), you can bet that class is going to be a big issue in the *Tales*. It’s most important in the portraits of members of these new classes like the Merchant or Tradesmen’s. These portraits explore the source of these pilgrims’ wealth and the way they (and their families) are dealing with their newfound social status. One of the most important questions this new class raises is what qualifies someone to have a position of power in their community. Is it only wealth, as seems to be the case when these men ascend to important positions in the government, or is something more “noble” required, as traditionalists would have us believe? The contrast between members of the new and traditional social classes allows *The Canterbury Tales* to explore this question. (See "Setting" for more on the historical context of the *Tales*.)

WEALTH

Since *The Canterbury Tales* are set in a time of economic transition for medieval society, money and wealth play a very big role here, particularly in the portraits of the pilgrims. We see the things money can buy in the descriptions of the clothes people are wearing, the horses they’re on, and the gadgets they’ve got. And we learn about the ways people can make money in portraits of characters like the Merchant, the Tradesmen, or the Wife of Bath. We also hear a lot about the way characters can steal or cheat their way to money, as the Reeve or Pardoner do. In many of the portraits, we witness the way that skill with money-handling can lead to power, deserved or otherwise, and the way lack of concern for money (the Clerk) can be just as troubling as excessive greed (almost all the other characters). Most often, when the *Tales* talk about money, it’s to question the ethics of a particular character’s relationship to it, particularly in the case of the religious characters who have taken vows of poverty.

FRIENDSHIP

Among the Canterbury pilgrims we see varying versions of, and motivations for, friendship, ranging from similar interests to greed to
obligations of friendship that are very different from those of today. All of these versions of friendship reflect upon the ultimate friendship in *The Canterbury Tales*, the fellowship of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. One of the Host’s main goals is to keep the pilgrims in a state of easy fellowship with one another, which is why, in the course of the pilgrimage, questions arise about the proper behavior of a fellowship. Should members of fellowship engage in debate? How should they solve conflicts between members? And can just anyone belong to a fellowship? The conflicts that arise between the pilgrims as they travel suggest that, of all the ways one might make one’s way to Canterbury, in “felaweshipe” is the most difficult of all.

**TIME**

The *Canterbury Tales* constantly mark the passing of time. The narrator often tells us exactly what time it was when a particular event occurred, and even the way he (or the Host) arrived at this calculation by coordinating the day of the year with the position of the sun. The Host seems to have a sense of urgency about the tale-telling competition, constantly reminding the pilgrims that time is slipping away from them. When he waxes poetic about time, the Host compares it to a stream that’s running quickly, the water never to be regained. Yet, despite this fatalism, or sense of powerlessness, about the passage of time, the poem also suggests that it’s possible to avoid what’s depressing about lost time by using it well. That’s probably the reason the Host is so emphatic that the pilgrims keep on telling those tales. To him, at least, tale-telling is a way of using time well.

**LIES AND DECEIT**

Many of the pilgrims in the General Prologue are trying to appear to be something they’re not. The Prioress wants to appear to be a courtly dilettante. The Merchant would like people to think he’s financially solvent. The narrator helps us see through these deceptions, and they become part of what makes *The Canterbury Tales* funny. Other pilgrims make their living through deception; like the Pardoner, who makes a pretty penny on fake relics, or the Friar, who convinces people he’s poor enough to deserve
charity. Still other characters portray powerless social groups, like women and the elderly, as particularly likely to engage in deception. This accusation reveals the way people in power can keep that power by calling into question the very words the powerless speak. But perhaps the most important way in which lies and deceit make their appearance in *The Canterbury Tales* is in their association with tale-telling. This raises the question of what makes a story true, and of how the categories of truth and falsehood apply to literature, if at all.

**SPIRITUALITY**

Since there are many religious figures in *The Canterbury Tales*, we would expect religion and its attendant subjects to be a common topic, and it is. The biggest question about holiness in the *Tales* is whether outward shows of piety, like those practiced by the Summoner and the Pardoner, are enough to constitute true holiness. This question is not as cut-and-dried as it might appear, since the medieval church endorsed the value of outward, physical shows of piety like the very pilgrimage upon which these characters have embarked. But characters like the Parson and the Plowman suggest that something more might be required for true holiness, and that the "something more" might not be as fussy and complicated as pilgrims like the Prioress, Pardoner, or Summoner would have us believe.