**Closer Look**

**Chaucer’s Guided Tour of Medieval Life and Literature**

Rich people, poor people, stock brokers, artists, farmers, street vendors . . . with all of the different lifestyles in our culture, you may wonder what single event could gather together people from all parts of society. Geoffrey Chaucer found in his own society an orderly, even joyous event that gathered people from diverse backgrounds and occupations—a pilgrimage, or journey to a sacred spot. It is such a pilgrimage that gathers together the diverse characters in his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*.

**The Journey Begins**

Like modern travelers, medieval pilgrims must have been eager to while away their time traveling. Chaucer uses this fact to set his story in motion. *The Canterbury Tales* begins with a Prologue, in which the Narrator, presumably Chaucer himself, meets 29 other pilgrims at the Tabard Inn, located in a suburb of London. As the pilgrims prepare for their journey, the host of the Inn, Harry Bailey, sets a challenge. To make the journey more entertaining, he suggests that each pilgrim tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two stories on the return trip. The person who tells the best tale will be treated to a feast hosted by the other pilgrims. The pilgrims accept the challenge, and Bailey himself decides to join them and judge the competition.

Each of the following sections of the work consists of one of the pilgrim’s tales. Brief transitions, as one storyteller finishes and another begins, link the stories. In this way, the work is actually a story about stories, twenty-four different tales set within the overarching tale of the pilgrimage.

**Snapshots of an Era**

In the Prologue, Chaucer sketches a brief but vivid portrait of each pilgrim, creating a lively sense of medieval life. In itself, the Prologue is a great literary achievement. As critic Vincent Hopper notes,

> The description of the various pilgrims turn in rapid sequence from an article of clothing to a point of character and back again with no apparent organization or desire for it. Yet so effective is this artful artlessness that each pilgrim stands out sharply as a type of medieval personality and also as a highly individualized character. . . .

Chaucer begins his survey of medieval society with the courtly world, which centered around the nobility. Medieval nobles such as Chaucer’s Knight held land granted them by a lord or king, for whom they fought in times of war. In the middle ranks of medieval society were learned professionals, such as Chaucer’s Doctor, and wealthy businessmen. The lower orders included craftsmen, storekeepers, and minor administrators, such as the Reeve and the Manciple. The various ranks of the
Church, a cornerstone of medieval society, are represented by characters from the Prioress to the Summoner.

However, as Chaucer writes about character ranks and types, he presents them as real people, individuals who defy categorizing. For example, though all outward appearances suggest that the Merchant is wealthy, he is, in fact, deeply in debt—a secret he keeps from some of his fellow travelers. Such breaks in stereotype provide readers with an even greater insight into the daily lives of medieval people.

**A Literary Tour**

The popular genres in Chaucer’s day included romances (tales of chivalry), *fabliaux* (short, bawdy, humorous stories), the stories of saint’s lives, sermons, and allegories (narratives in which characters represent abstractions such as Pride or Honor). Each pilgrim chooses to tell a type of tale consistent with his or her character, and each of the major forms of medieval literature is represented. Chaucer wrote much of the *Tales* using his own form, the heroic couplet, a pair of rhyming lines with five stressed syllables each. For this important innovation, along with his other achievements, he is known as the father of English poetry.

**The Endless Road**

Traveling with Chaucer’s pilgrims, a reader may feel that world is a big place but that, somehow, all of its pieces fit together. *The Canterbury Tales* reminds us that every journey from here to there is filled with stories, waiting to be told.

**Activity**

**Modern Day Travelers**

Imagine taking a long bus or plane trip. With a group, discuss the types of people traveling with you. Come up with your own cast of characters for a modern-day version of *The Canterbury Tales*. Use these questions to guide your discussion:

- What different kinds of people make up our society today? Identify six types and build a character that matches each.
- In what ways might many of these individuals break the stereotype they outwardly appear to fit?
- What kind of tale might each character tell?

Choose a point person to share your ideas with the class.

**Build Skills**

Poem
Meet The Author

Geoffrey Chaucer
(1343?–1400)

Son of a merchant, page in a royal house, soldier, diplomat, and royal clerk, Geoffrey Chaucer saw quite a bit of the medieval world. His varied experiences helped prepare him to write The Canterbury Tales. This masterpiece provides the best contemporary picture we have of fourteenth-century England. Gathering characters from different walks of life, Chaucer takes the reader on a journey through medieval society.

The Poet’s Beginning The exact date of Geoffrey Chaucer’s birth is unknown, but official records furnish many details of his active life. Born into a middle-class family, Chaucer was sent in his early teens to work as page to the wife of Lionel of Antwerp, a son of the reigning monarch, Edward III. Through this position, middle-class Chaucer was introduced to the aristocratic society of England. In 1359, while serving in the English Army in France, Chaucer was captured and held prisoner. King Edward paid a £16 (sixteen-pound) ransom for his release—a sum that was eight times what a simple laborer might make in a year. In 1366, Chaucer married Philippa Pan, a lady-in-waiting to the queen. Their eldest child, Thomas, continued his father’s rise in the world, marrying a noblewoman and acquiring great wealth.

The Poet Matures Chaucer began writing in his twenties, practicing and honing his skills as a poet as he rose through the ranks of medieval society. His early poems were based on the works of European poets. These were followed by various translations of French poetry. His first major work, The Book of the Duchess, was probably completed in early 1369, almost one year after the death of Blanche of Lancaster, for whose grieving husband, John of Gaunt, he wrote the poem. As Chaucer grew older, he developed a mature style of his own. In Troilus and Criseyde, a later poem drawn from the Greek legend of the Trojan War, Chaucer displays penetrating insight into human character.

The Canterbury Tales Chaucer wrote The Canterbury Tales in his later years. No one knows for certain what prompted him to begin this work. Chaucer’s inspiration may have come from his own participation in the pilgrimage to Canterbury. A pilgrimage is a long journey to a shrine or holy site, taken by people who wish to express their devotion. Chaucer certainly had the opportunity to observe many pilgrims starting their journeys—a window of his London home overlooked the pilgrim road that led to Canterbury.

In this masterwork, each character tells a tale on the way to Canterbury. Just as the tellers of The Canterbury Tales come from the length and breadth of medieval society, the tales encompass medieval literature—from romance to comedy,
rhyme to prose, from crude humor to religious mysteries. Only 24 of the projected 120 tales were finished, but they stand together as a complete work.

**The Father of English Poetry** In his own lifetime, Geoffrey Chaucer was considered the greatest English poet. Recognized as a shrewd storyteller, he was also praised by a contemporary as the first to “rain the gold dewdrops of speech and eloquence” into English literature. Throughout history, new generations of poets writing in English have studied his work for inspiration and insight.

Chaucer lies buried in Westminster Abbey. In recognition of his unique position in England’s literary tradition, Westminster’s honorary burial area for distinguished writers, the Poets’ Corner, was established around his tomb.

**Preview**

**Connecting to the Literature** It may have been a class trip you took to a museum or a visit to a famous person’s birthplace. Trips taken for inspiration or renewal, even if they are not religious, can loosely be termed pilgrimages. The pilgrims who gather in the Prologue are about to depart on such a journey.

**Literary Analysis**

**Characterization** As you read the Prologue, look for these forms of characterization—techniques of revealing character:

- **Direct characterization** presents direct statements about a character, such as Chaucer’s statement that the Knight “followed chivalry, \( / \) Truth, honor. . . .”
- **Indirect characterization** uses actions, thoughts, and dialogue to reveal a character’s personality. By saying “he was not gaily dressed,” for instance, Chaucer suggests that the Knight is not vain and perhaps takes the pilgrimage seriously enough to rush to join it straight from battle.

**Connecting Literary Elements** Each character in *The Canterbury Tales* represents a different segment of society in Chaucer’s time. By noting the virtues and faults of each, Chaucer provides **social commentary**, writing that offers insight into society, its values, and its customs. While reading, draw conclusions from the characters about Chaucer’s views on English society.

**Reading Strategy**

**Analyzing Difficult Sentences** Chaucer’s Prologue begins with an eighteen-line sentence. To analyze difficult sentences such as this one, use the questions *when, who, where, what,* and *how* to identify the essential information each conveys. Use a chart like the one shown to finish analyzing Chaucer’s first sentence.
Background

In medieval Christianity, pilgrimages—long, annual trips to holy places—were a popular way to express religious devotion. Canterbury, a town 55 miles southeast of London, was a major destination for English pilgrims. The cathedral in Canterbury was the site of Archbishop Thomas à Becket’s murder in 1170. Days after the murder and three years before Becket was made a saint, people began flocking to the cathedral to pay their respects.
The first eighteen lines of the Prologue are presented here in Chaucer’s original Middle English, followed by the entire Prologue in a modern translation.

Whan that Aprill with his shourës sootë
The droghte of March hath percêd to the rootë,
And bathëd every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendrëd is the flour;

5 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweetë breeth
Inspirëd hath in every holt and heeth
The tendrë croppës, and the yongë sonnë
Hath in the Ram his halvë cours yronnë,
And smalë fowelës maken melodyë,

10 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straungë strondës,
To fernë halwës, kowthe in sondry londës;

15 And specially from every shirës endë
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wendë,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seekë.

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,

5 When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath

Upon tender shoots, and the young sun

His half-course in the sign of the Ram has run,

And the small fowl are making melody

10 That sleep away the night with open eye

(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)

Then people long to go on pilgrimages

And palmer long to seek the stranger strands

Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,

15 And specially, from every shire’s end

In England, down to Canterbury they wend

To seek the holy blissful martyr quick

To give his help to them when they were sick.

It happened in that season that one day

20 In Southwark at The Tabard as I lay

Ready to go on pilgrimage and start

For Canterbury, most devout at heart,

At night there came into that hostelry

Some nine and twenty in a company

25 Of sundry folk happening then to fall

In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all

That towards Canterbury meant to ride.

The rooms and stables of the inn were wide;

They made us easy, all was of the best.
And shortly, when the sun had gone to rest,
By speaking to them all upon the trip
I soon was one of them in fellowship
And promised to rise early and take the way
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.

But nonetheless, while I have time and space,
Before my story takes a further pace,
It seems a reasonable thing to say
What their condition was, the full array
Of each of them, as it appeared to me
According to profession and degree,
And what apparel they were riding in;
And at a Knight I therefore will begin.
There was a Knight, a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
To ride abroad had followed chivalry,
Truth, honor, generousness and courtesy.
He had done nobly in his sovereign's war
And ridden into battle, no man more,
As well in Christian as heathen places,
And ever honored for his noble graces.
When we took Alexandria, he was there.
He often sat at table in the chair
Of honor, above all nations, when in Prussia.
In Lithuania he had ridden, and Russia,

55 No Christian man so often, of his rank.

When, in Granada, Algeciras sank

Under assault, he had been there, and in

North Africa, raiding Benamarin;

In Anatolia he had been as well

60 And fought when Ayas and Attalia fell,

For all along the Mediterranean coast

He had embarked with many a noble host.

In fifteen mortal battles he had been

And jousted for our faith at Tramissene

65 Thrice in the lists, and always killed his man.

This same distinguished knight had led the van

Once with the Bey of Balat, doing work

For him against another heathen Turk;

He was of sovereign value in all eyes.

70 And though so much distinguished, he was wise

And in his bearing modest as a maid.

He never yet a boorish thing had said

In all his life to any, come what might;

He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight.

75 Speaking of his equipment, he possessed

Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.

He wore a fustian tunic stained and dark
With smudges where his armor had left mark;

Just home from service, he had joined our ranks

80 To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.

He had his son with him, a fine young Squire,

A lover and cadet, a lad of fire

With locks as curly as if they had been pressed.

He was some twenty years of age, I guessed.

85 In stature he was of a moderate length,

With wonderful agility and strength.

He’d seen some service with the cavalry

In Flanders and Artois and Picardy

And had done valiantly in little space

90 Of time, in hope to win his lady’s grace.

He was embroidered like a meadow bright

And full of freshest flowers, red and white.

Singing he was, or fluting all the day;

He was as fresh as is the month of May.

95 Short was his gown, the sleeves were long and wide;

He knew the way to sit a horse and ride.

He could make songs and poems and recite,

Knew how to joust and dance, to draw and write.

He loved so hotly that till dawn grew pale

100 He slept as little as a nightingale.

Courteous he was, lowly and serviceable,

And carved to serve his father at the table.
There was a Yeoman with him at his side,
No other servant; so he chose to ride.
105 This Yeoman wore a coat and hood of green,
And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen
And neatly sheathed, hung at his belt the while
—For he could dress his gear in yeoman style,
His arrows never drooped their feathers low—
110 And in his hand he bore a mighty bow.
His head was like a nut, his face was brown.
He knew the whole of woodcraft up and down.
A saucy brace was on his arm to ward
It from the bow-string, and a shield and sword
115 Hung at one side, and at the other slipped
A jaunty dirk, spear-sharp and well-equipped.
A medal of St. Christopher he wore
Of shining silver on his breast, and bore
A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,
120 That dangled from a baldric of bright green.
He was a proper forester I guess.
There also was a Nun, a Prioress.
Her way of smiling very simple and coy.
125 And she was known as Madam Eglantyne.
And well she sang a service, with a fine
Intoning through her nose, as was most seemly,
And she spoke daintily in French, extremely,
After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe;
French in the Paris style she did not know.
At meat her manners were well taught withal;
No morsel from her lips did she let fall,
Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;
But she could carry a morsel up and keep
The smallest drop from falling on her breast.
For courtliness she had a special zest,
And she would wipe her upper lip so clean
That not a trace of grease was to be seen
Upon the cup when she had drunk; to eat,
She reached a hand sedately for the meat.
She certainly was very entertaining,
Pleasant and friendly in her ways, and straining
To counterfeit a courtly kind of grace,
A stately bearing fitting to her place,
And to seem dignified in all her dealings.
As for her sympathies and tender feelings,
She was so charitably solicitous
She used to weep if she but saw a mouse
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bleeding.
And she had little dogs she would be feeding
With roasted flesh, or milk, or fine white bread.
And bitterly she wept if one were dead
Or someone took a stick and made it smart;
She was all sentiment and tender heart.

155 Her veil was gathered in a seemly way,
Her nose was elegant, her eyes glass-gray;
Her mouth was very small, but soft and red,
Her forehead, certainly, was fair of spread,
Almost a span across the brows, I own;

160 She was indeed by no means undergrown.

Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.
She wore a coral trinket on her arm,
A set of beads, the gaudies tricked in green,
Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen

165 On which there first was graven a crowned A,
And lower, *Amor vincit omnia*.  

Another *Nun*, the chaplain at her cell,
Was riding with her, and *three Priests* as well.

A *Monk* there was, one of the finest sort

170 Who rode the country; hunting was his sport.
A manly man, to be an Abbot able;
Many a dainty horse he had in stable.
His bridle, when he rode, a man might hear
Jingling in a whistling wind as clear,
Aye, and as loud as does the chapel bell
Where my lord Monk was Prior of the cell.
The Rule of good St. Benet or St. Maur
As old and strict he tended to ignore;
He let go by the things of yesterday
And took the modern world's more spacious way.
He did not rate that text at a plucked hen
Which says that hunters are not holy men
And that a monk uncloistered is a mere
Fish out of water, flapping on the pier,
That is to say a monk out of his cloister.
That was a text he held not worth an oyster;
And I agreed and said his views were sound;
Was he to study till his head went round
Poring over books in cloisters? Must he toil
As Austin bade and till the very soil?
Was he to leave the world upon the shelf?
Let Austin have his labor to himself.
This Monk was therefore a good man to horse;
Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.
Hunting a hare or riding at a fence
Was all his fun, he spared for no expense.
I saw his sleeves were garnished at the hand
With fine gray fur, the finest in the land,
And on his hood, to fasten it at his chin
He had a wrought-gold cunningly fashioned pin;
Into a lover's knot it seemed to pass.
His head was bald and shone like looking-glass;
So did his face, as if it had been greased.
He was a fat and personable priest;
His prominent eyeballs never seemed to settle.
They glittered like the flames beneath a kettle;
Supple his boots, his horse in fine condition.
He was a prelate fit for exhibition,
He was not pale like a tormented soul.

He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.
His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.
There was a Friar, a wanton one and merry
A Limiter, a very festive fellow.
In all Four Orders there was none so mellow
So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned speech.
He'd fixed up many a marriage, giving each
Of his young women what he could afford her.
He was a noble pillar to his Order.
Highly beloved and intimate was he
With County folk within his boundary,
And city dames of honor and possessions;
For he was qualified to hear confessions,
Or so he said, with more than priestly scope;

From “The Pardoner’s Tale” by Geoffrey Chaucer translated by Neil Coghill from *The Canterbury Tales*.

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