The Canterbury Tales
by Geoffrey Chaucer
Geoffrey Chaucer

- Considered the father of English poetry
- First to write about the common people.
- Introduced iambic pentameter
- Chaucer began the tales in 1387 and continued until his death in 1400.
- First writer buried in Westminster Abbey
One of the reasons Chaucer is so important is that he made the decision to write in English and not French. In the centuries following the Norman invasion, French was the language spoken by those in power. *The Canterbury Tales* was one of the first major works in literature written in English. No text in his own hand still exists, but a surprising number of copies survive from the 1500s - more than 80. This suggests the tales were enormously popular in medieval England.
Twenty nine people who represent all aspects of Medieval society go on a pilgrimage to the cathedral at Canterbury in southeast England.
The cathedral at Canterbury is the main cathedral of the Church of England. The shrine to the martyred Saint Thomas a Becket is located at this cathedral.
Saint Thomas a Becket was the archbishop of Canterbury, and in 1170 he was martyred by some knights of the king of England, Henry II, who was overheard complaining about Becket’s loyalty to the church at Rome over his loyalty to his king.
Chaucer’s characters are going to pay respects to this shrine as a part of a religious pilgrimage. They all meet at a tavern to begin their journey.
The Canterbury Tales begins with a Prologue which sets the scene. 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:

Each pilgrim will 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 *Canterbury Tales* are called a **frame story**, meaning that there are many stories “framed” in the larger story of the pilgrimage to Canterbury.

- The Outer Frame Story is about the pilgrims meeting at the Tabard Inn preparing for a journey to Canterbury.
- The Inner Frame Story would be all the stories told by the assembled pilgrims along their journey to and from Canterbury.
In the Prologue, Chaucer sketches a brief but vivid portrait of each pilgrim, creating a lively sense of medieval life.

The description may literally describe an article of clothing, but figuratively imply something about that character.

**Satire** - a literary composition, in verse or prose, in which human folly and vice are held up to scorn, derision, or ridicule.

Like sarcasm . . . He says one thing, but means another. Our job is to read and comprehend the literal description of each pilgrim, and then, we must figuratively interpret what Chaucer is trying to imply about that pilgrim’s character.
In the Prologue, Chaucer examines three segments of Medieval England:

- The Old Feudal order – these are all of the pilgrims associated with the feudal class system.
  
  Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Plowman . . .

- The Merchant Class – this was the rising middle class of the time; towns and cities were emerging and therefore necessitated the need for skilled services:
  
  Merchant, Man of Law, Guildsmen, Cook . . .

- The Ecclesiastical (Church) Class – these were all of the members of the church. Chaucer is most critical of this segment of his society.
  
  Prioress, Monk, Friar, Pardoner . . .
Each character represents a different segment of society in Chaucer’s time. By noting the virtues and faults of each, Chaucer provides social commentary, or 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.
Chaucer uses the popular genres of his time when he creates the inner stories of the various pilgrims:

- **Romances (tales of chivalry)**
  - The Wife of Bath’s Tale

- **Fabliaux (short, bawdy, humorous stories)**
  - The Miller’s Tale

- **The stories of saint’s lives, sermons**
  - The Parson’s Tale

- **Allegories (narratives in which characters represent abstractions such as Pride or Honor)**.
  - The Pardoner’s Tale
The Order of the Tales

- The General Prologue
- The Knight
- The Miller
- The Reeve
- The Cook
- Man of Law
- Wife of Bath
- Friar
- Summoner
- Clerk
- Merchant
- Squire
- Franklin
- Physician
- Pardoner
- Etc…
The Knight - The first pilgrim Chaucer describes in the General Prologue, and the teller of the first tale. The Knight represents the ideal of a medieval Christian man-at-arms. He has participated in no less than fifteen of the great crusades of his era. Brave, experienced, and prudent, the narrator greatly admires him.
The Miller - Stout and brawny, the Miller has a wart on his nose and a big mouth, both literally and figuratively. He threatens the Host’s notion of propriety when he drunkenly insists on telling the second tale. Indeed, the Miller seems to enjoy overturning all conventions: he ruins the Host’s carefully planned storytelling order; he rips doors off hinges; and he tells a tale that is somewhat blasphemous, ridiculing religious clerks, scholarly clerks, carpenters, and women.
The Wife of Bath - Bath is an English town on the Avon River, not the name of this woman’s husband. Though she is a seamstress by occupation, she seems to be a professional wife. She has been married five times and had many other affairs in her youth, making her well practiced in the art of love. She presents herself as someone who loves marriage and sex, but, from what we see of her, she also takes pleasure in rich attire, talking, and arguing. She is deaf in one ear and has a gap between her front teeth, which was considered attractive in Chaucer’s time. She has traveled on pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times and elsewhere in Europe as well.
The Pardoner - Pardoners granted papal indulgences—reprieves from penance in exchange for charitable donations to the Church. Many pardoners, including this one, collected profits for themselves. In fact, Chaucer’s Pardoner excels in fraud, carrying a bag full of fake relics—for example, he claims to have the veil of the Virgin Mary. The Pardoner has long, greasy, yellow hair and is beardless. These characteristics were associated with shiftiness and gender ambiguity in Chaucer’s time. The Pardoner also has a gift for singing and preaching whenever he finds himself inside a church.