

**PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY
TALES**

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Summary of The Prologue

- *One spring day, the Narrator of The Canterbury Tales rents a room at the Tabard Inn before he recommences his journey to Canterbury. That evening, a group of people arrive at the inn, all of whom are also going to Canterbury to receive the blessings of "the holy blissful martyr," St. Thomas à Becket. Calling themselves "pilgrims" because of their destination, they accept the Narrator into their company. The Narrator describes his newfound travelling companions.*

two more tales on the journey back. The person who tells the best story will be rewarded with a sumptuous dinner paid for by the other members of the party. The Host decides to accompany the pilgrims to Canterbury and serve as the judge of the tales. The Host at the inn, Harry Bailey, suggests that, to make the trip to Canterbury pass more pleasantly, each member of the party tell two tales on the journey to Canterbury and and serve as the judge of the tales.

ANALYSIS

- *The primary function of these opening lines is to provide a physical setting and the motivation for the Canterbury pilgrimage. Chaucer's original plan, to have each pilgrim tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back, was never completed; we have tales only on the way to Canterbury. In The Prologue are portraits of all levels of English life. The order of the portraits is important because it provides a clue as to the social standing of the different occupations. The pilgrims presented first are representative of the highest social rank, with social rank descending with every new pilgrim introduced.*

Highest in the social rank are representatives of the aristocracy or those with pretensions toward nobility. First in this group are the Knight and his household, including the Squire. The second group within those of the highest social standing includes the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar, who ought to be of the lower class, but who, as a pious beggar, has begged so well that his prosperity ironically slips him into the company of the nobles. Of these pilgrims, probably only the Knight and his son, the Squire, qualify as true aristocrats, both outwardly and inwardly. The "gentillesse" — refinement resulting from good breeding — of the Prioress and the Monk is largely external and affected.

Following this class are pilgrims whose high social rank is mainly derived from commercial wealth. Included in this group are the Merchant, who illegally made much of his money from selling French coins (a practice that was forbidden in England at the time); the Sergeant of Law, who made his fortune by using his knowledge as a lawyer to buy up foreclosed property for practically nothing; the Clerk, who belongs with this group of pilgrims because of his gentle manners and extensive knowledge of books; and the Franklin, who made enough money to become a country gentleman and is in a position to push for a noble station. (It is evident both from the relationship of the Franklin's portrait to that of the guildsmen, presented next, and from Harry Bailey's scornful remarks to him, however, that he is not yet of the noble class).

The next class of pilgrims is the guildsmen, consisting of men who belong to something similar to specialized unions of craftsmen guilds. Among this group of specialized laborers are the Haberdasher, the Dyer, the Carpenter, the Weaver, and the Tapestry-Maker. None of them tell a tale.

A middle-class group of pilgrims comprises the next lower position of social rank. First presented in this group is the Cook, whom we might consider out of place — ranked too high — but who, as a master of his trade, is greatly respected by his fellow travelers. Also included in this social class are the Shipman, because of his immense knowledge of and travels throughout the world, and the Physician, a doctor of medicine (a career that was less revered in the Middle Ages than it is now). The Wife of Bath, who is the last of this group to be presented, is included in this group because of her knowledge and deportment and her many other pilgrimages.

The Parson and the Plowman comprise the next group of pilgrims, the virtuous poor or lower class. Each, although very poor, represents all of the Christian virtues.

The last group of pilgrims include those of the immoral lower class. Among this group of pilgrims are the Manciple, who profits from buying food for the lawyers in the Inns of Court, and the vulgar Miller, who steals from his customers. The Reeve tells dirty stories and cheats his trusting young master, and the corrupt Summoner takes bribes. Last, and most corrupt in this litany of undesirables is the Pardoner, who sells false pardons and fake relics.

CHARCTERS IN THE PROLOGUE

- ***The Narrator** - The narrator makes it quite clear that he is also a character in his book. Although he is called Chaucer, we should be wary of accepting his words and opinions as Chaucer's own. In the General Prologue, the narrator presents himself as a gregarious and naïve character. Later on, the Host accuses him of being silent and sullen. Because the narrator writes down his impressions of the pilgrims from memory, whom he does and does not like, and what he chooses and chooses not to remember about the characters, tells us as much about the narrator's own prejudices as it does about the characters themselves.*

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 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.

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 Prioress - Described as modest and quiet, this Prioress (a nun who is head of her convent) aspires to have exquisite taste. Her table manners are dainty, she knows French (though not the French of the court), she dresses well, and she is charitable and compassionate.

The Monk - Most monks of the Middle Ages lived in monasteries according to the Rule of Saint Benedict, which demanded that they devote their lives to “work and prayer.” This Monk cares little for the Rule; his devotion is to hunting and eating. He is large, loud, and well clad in hunting boots and furs.

The Friar - Roaming priests with no ties to a monastery, friars were a great object of criticism in Chaucer’s time. Always ready to befriend young women or rich men who might need his services, the friar actively administers the sacraments in his town, especially those of marriage and confession. However, Chaucer’s worldly Friar has taken to accepting bribes.

The Summoner - The Summoner brings persons accused of violating Church law to ecclesiastical court. This Summoner is a lecherous man whose face is scarred by leprosy. He gets drunk frequently, is irritable, and is not particularly qualified for his position. He spouts the few words of Latin he knows in an attempt to sound educated.

The Host - The leader of the group, the Host is large, loud, and merry, although he possesses a quick temper. He mediates among the pilgrims and facilitates the flow of the tales. His title of "host" may be a pun, suggesting both an innkeeper and the Eucharist, or Holy Host.

The Parson - The only devout churchman in the company, the Parson lives in poverty, but is rich in holy thoughts and deeds. The pastor of a sizable town, he preaches the Gospel and makes sure to practice what he preaches. He is everything that the Monk, the Friar, and the Pardoner are not.

The Squire - The Knight's son and apprentice. The Squire is curly-haired, youthfully handsome, and loves dancing and courting.

The Clerk - The Clerk is a poor student of philosophy. Having spent his money on books and learning rather than on fine clothes, he is threadbare and wan. He speaks little, but when he does, his words are wise and full of moral virtue.

The Man Of Law - A successful lawyer commissioned by the king. He upholds justice in matters large and small and knows every statute of England's law by heart.

The Manciple - A manciple was in charge of getting provisions for a college or court. Despite his lack of education, this Manciple is smarter than the thirty lawyers he feeds.

The Merchant - The Merchant trades in furs and other cloths, mostly from Flanders. He is part of a powerful and wealthy class in Chaucer's society.

The Shipman - Brown-skinned from years of sailing, the Shipman has seen every bay and river in England, and exotic ports in Spain and Carthage as well. He is a bit of a rascal, known for stealing wine while the ship's captain sleeps.

The Physician - The Physician is one of the best in his profession, for he knows the cause of every malady and can cure most of them. Though the Physician keeps himself in perfect physical health, the narrator calls into question the Physician's spiritual health: he rarely consults the Bible and has an unhealthy love of financial gain.

The Franklin - The word “franklin” means “free man.” In Chaucer’s society, a franklin was neither a vassal serving a lord nor a member of the nobility. This particular franklin is a connoisseur of food and wine, so much so that his table remains laid and ready for food all day.

The Reeve - A reeve was similar to a steward of a manor, and this reeve performs his job shrewdly—his lord never loses so much as a ram to the other employees, and the vassals under his command are kept in line. However, he steals from his master.

The Plowman - The Plowman is the Parson’s brother and is equally good-hearted. A member of the peasant class, he pays his tithes to the Church and leads a good Christian life.

The Guildsmen - Listed together, the five Guildsmen appear as a unit. English guilds were a combination of labor unions and social fraternities: craftsmen of similar occupations joined together to increase their bargaining power and live communally. All five Guildsmen are clad in the livery of their brotherhood.

The Cook - The Cook works for the Guildsmen. Chaucer gives little detail about him, although he mentions a crusty sore on the Cook's leg.

The Yeoman - The servant who accompanies the Knight and the Squire. The narrator mentions that his dress and weapons suggest he may be a forester.

The Second Nun - The Second Nun is not described in the General Prologue, but she tells a saint's life for her tale.

The Nun's Priest - Like the Second Nun, the Nun's Priest is not described in the General Prologue. His story of Chanticleer, however, is well crafted and suggests that he is a witty, self-effacing preacher.

Style and Structure

- *The key thing about Chaucer's **The Canterbury Tales** is that it's a story ... within a story. He uses a frame narrative to set up who all of the characters are, and then the characters each tell stories of their own. The section of the poem that does this frame narrative is called the **General Prologue**, and that's what we're going to talk about in this video.*
- *There's a narrator who tells us that a bunch of pilgrims have all gathered in an inn - it's called the Tabard Inn - in the south of London in April, he tells us, with all its 'sweet showers' reviving the plants. It's the perfect time for making pilgrimages, so they're all doing it. They've spent the night at this inn, and they're all getting ready to leave to go on their pilgrimage to Canterbury.*

The narrator guy decides he's just going to describe them all, and there are a lot of pilgrims. They're all totally different from each other; they've got very different personalities. He identifies them all by their occupations - so, what they do - but his descriptions are interesting because more often than not, he's trying to point out discrepancies between what their job is and how they actually act. He, generally, praises everybody, but you can kind of tell that in some cases it's meant to be ironic; it's meant to be a joke. (Like 'Oh yeah, he's really great. No, he's not.') So there's a lot of that going on. There's a ton of pilgrims, and we're not going to talk about all of them, but we'll just talk about the most interesting, most significant ones. Go through a few of them. That's the spirit of the General Prologue; we're just cutting some things.

J.M. Manly avers in the Cambridge History of English Literature, 'Fourteenth century was a dark epoch in the history of English'. This statement is both historically and linguistically correct when applied to the medieval period. The English Language was in infancy and required the hands of a craftsman and the mind of a genius to reach its maturity. This task was left to no other than Chaucer because other notable writers of the age namely Wycliffe, William Langland and Gower wrote little in English. Even Shakespeare felt doubtful about the future of English in sixteenth century when much had already been accomplished, but it was Chaucer who adopted a distinct style in writing in English. Literature and language were in the process of formation, which were established on firm foundations by Chaucer. That is why Dryden hails Chaucer as 'Father of English literature'.

Firstly, Chaucer's style is marked by lucidity of expression, joyous originality and easiness free of ambiguities and direct philosophical maxims. In describing nearly all his characters, he uses colloquial language easy to understand for a common man. For example, Chaucer says, Knight was as meeke as maide or Prioress leete no morsel falle from his lippes. His similes and metaphors are befittingly employed throughout the Prologue. Secondly, his style is not bookish or crammed. His style is rather cultivated and tailored as much to the intellectuals as to the laymen. This is the reason The Prologue has been popular with men of all levels of understanding.

Thirdly, style is humorous and ironical. His style is not pointed like that of Juvenal or Swift, he does criticize society, in fact his Prologue is a criticism of life in the words of Matthew Arnold as literature should be, but he passes from character to character with a smile and uses irony as his weapon to attack the follies of society rather than satire. Fourthly, Chaucer takes up the description of his characters from the positive traits and jumps to the negative ones to startle the reader. Squire, Prioress and Wife of Bath are good characters in the first few lines, it is just after a few remarks, that we come to understand their real nature. Fifthly, his style is not ostentatious. He doesn't exhibit his art through his style. We simply see the picture of society and not the technique through which it was drawn. So Chaucer believes in the words of Swift that real art lies in the concealment of art.

His style is narrative, descriptive and reflective and has all qualities of speech. His sentences are short and simple in their structure. His stylistic qualities and poetic genius contributed to English what no other did before his time as ascertained by David Daiches with Chaucer, the English language and literature grew at a bound to full maturity. No other Middle English writer has his skill, his range, his complexity and his large humane outlook. His light humour and ironical pieces have rendered such services to English, which can only be compared to those of Emperor Augustus in Ancient Rome who found Rome as brick and left it as marble. An apt remark from Lowell will finely conclude the topic that Chaucer found English in dialect and left it a language.

Realism of Chaucer's in 'The Prologue to Canterbury Tales'

The British society in transition gave an impetus to the Englishman's intrinsic love of travel, fresh air, good fellowship, gossip, story telling and music. He sought an outlet for all these in the pilgrimages he undertook. According to him, pilgrims were united in their desire though not in their objectives. The expedition generally turned out to be a holiday outing with an air of carnival about it. These pilgrims constituted a heterogeneous group of men and women drawn from different social classes pursuing different avocations.

*Maintaining a rigid distinction between one class and other had become a thing of the past. The vast canvas of **prologue** depicts the changing social system. The priest and the layman, the poet and the lawyer, the scholar and the artisan could get together on terms of near equality. It would be fairly easy to reconstruct the modes and values of social life from reading of the **general prologue to the Canterbury tales** with very near historical accuracy. In this prologue, Chaucer does not let go a single detail of dress or character that would add credence to the story recorded.*