Geoffrey Chaucer’s famous work is significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it is the first complete work written in English, the language of the common people. “The Canterbury Tales” also gives us a very unique and singular look at Medieval English society. The characters in the poem come from nearly every class of Medieval life, giving us a remarkable glimpse into a colorful and romantic period in English history.

Basically, at the time of Chaucer, Medieval society could be broken down into the following five classes:

**The Clergy** / those associated with the Medieval Church

**The Nobility** / those with ties to the Monarchy

**The Middle Class** / professionals and the Gentry (landowners)

**The Working Class** / skilled laborers

**The Peasant Class (serfs)** / the poor, who were tied to the land

Divided according to their class, Chaucer’s pilgrims fall into the following categories:

**Clergy Nobility The Middle Class The Working Class**

**The Prioress The Knight The Merchant The Haberdasher**

**The Nun’s Priest The Squire The Oxford Cleric The Dyer**

**The Monk The Yeoman The Serjeant-at-law The Carpenter**

**The Friar The Franklin The Weaver**

**The Parson The Doctor The Carpet Maker**

**The Reeve The Cook**

**The Manciple The Skipper**

**The Pardoner The Wife of Bath**

**The Summoner The Plowman**

**The Miller**

note the absence of the poor from Chaucer’s pilgrims - this is not surprising, since the peasant classes probably lacked the means to go on pilgrimage - they were almost entirely illiterate and could rarely, if ever, leave their farms.

The pilgrimage is to the shrine of the Holy Martyr, Thomas a Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, killed by the knights of King Henry II in the 12th century.