

Canterbury Tales (prologue)

Summary

By Geoffrey Chaucer
Jack Crane

After a description of the spring, Chaucer, the narrator, introduces each of the pilgrims one by one. The form of the General Prologue is an estates satire: Chaucer is describing characters from each of the three medieval estates (church, nobility, and peasantry) with various levels of mockery. The frame story of the General Prologue is a religious pilgrimage: all of these characters have come together to go to the cathedral at Canterbury. Chaucer describes each of the pilgrims' physical appearance very carefully, and this description often gives much insight into each of their characters. After Chaucer describes the pilgrims, he apologizes for any harshness or rudeness that might appear: he is simply trying to be as honest a narrator and use as clear, simple, unadorned language as possible. He then describes how the tale-telling contest begins. The Host at the Tabard Inn, Harry Bailly, proposes that instead of marching toward Canterbury in boring silence, the pilgrims tell each other amusing tales on the way there and back. The Host says that he will judge the tales and that everyone else will have to pay for the winner's dinner upon their return. The pilgrims readily agree to this jolly plan. They draw straws to see who will tell the first tale, and the Knight—the most noble of the company—happens to draw the straw to go first.

Canterbury Tales (Pardoner's Tale)

Summary

By Geoffrey Chaucer
Jack Crane

The Pardoner tells the story of three young rioters who spend their days carousing and drinking. They hear a coffin passing outside the tavern and learn that one of their friends has been stabbed by a thief named Death. The revelers pledge a bond of brotherhood among them and declare that they will slay Death. They meet an old man wandering the earth begging Death to let him die. He points them to an old oak, where he says Death is sitting. However, when the knights arrive, there are eight enormous bushels of gold in the spot. One of the rioters says that they should wait until nightfall to transport the gold, but that one of them should go to town to get provisions so that they can wait all day. They draw straws, and the youngest goes into town. While he is gone, the two others plot to kill him upon his return so that they will each have a bigger share of the money. But the youngest reveler also plots to kill the other two so that he can have the treasure to himself. He gets a strong poison from the apothecary and spikes two bottles of wine. The youngest reveler returns and the others kill him, but then they drink the poisoned wine and die on the same spot. Greed, the Pardoner reminds the pilgrims, is the root of all evils. The Pardoner tries to sell a fake relic to the Host, but the Host gets mad, and the Knight must step in to break up the fight.

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Character List

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Character Name	Description
The Clerk	The Clerk is a poor scholar who can only afford threadbare clothes because he spends all his spare money on books. There are many scholars through The Canterbury Tales, and though nearly all of them are poor, this does not dampen their spirits.
The Host	The Host at the Tabard Inn, Harry Bailly, is a jolly, lively tavern-keeper. He establishes the main frame narrative of the Tales, since he is the one who proposes the tale-telling game and sets the rules that it will follow. The Host joins the pilgrimage not as a figure seeking religious guidance but as guide and judge to the game. The Host's presence demonstrate that the main purpose of this pilgrimage lies not so much in the devout religious act but in the fun that these tourists will have along the way.
Chaucer (narrator)	Chaucer does not name himself in the General Prologue, but he is one of the characters who gather at the Tabard Inn. All of the descriptions of the pilgrims in the Prologue are narrated through the perspective of the character of Chaucer (which may or may not be the same as that of the author Chaucer). Although the Chaucer-narrator is not initially preparing to go on pilgrimage, after describing all the pilgrims, he decides to join the merry company on their journey.
Knight	The Knight is a noble man who fights for truth and for Christ rather than for his own glory or wealth. He has traveled throughout many heathen lands victoriously. The Knight is one of the few characters whom Chaucer praises wholeheartedly: he is a genuine example of the highest order of chivalry.
Squire	The Squire is a young knight in training, a member of the noble class. While he is chivalrous and genteel, he is not quite as perfect as his father, the Knight, as he wears fine clothes and is vain about his appearance. The Squire is being trained in both the arts of battle and the arts of courtly love.
Yeoman	Chaucer does not describe the Yeoman in much detail in the Prologue, primarily observing that since he is dressed in green clothing and keeps his arrows in good condition, he is an excellent forester who takes care of the Knight's land.

Prioress	The Prioress attempts to be dainty and wellbred, and Chaucer makes fun of her by describing how she speaks French with a terrible accent and sings the liturgy straight through her nose. Although the Prioress should be devoted to Christ, she is more concerned with worldly matters: her clothes are richly bedecked, and her coral rosary that says "Love conquers all" serves as a decorative piece rather than a religious article.
Monk	The Monk is another religious character who is corrupt. Instead of reading in his cell, the Monk prefers to go hunting, even though this is against the rules of the order of St. Benedict. The Monk also wears richly decorated clothing rather than the simple robes that one might expect a monk to wear.
Friar	In medieval society, friars were mendicants, or beggars who could not work but had to live off the charity of others. Although they were supposed to be humble and modest, this Friar is jolly and wants to lead a comfortable life. Instead of ministering to lepers and beggars, as friars are supposed to do, the Friar cultivates relationships with rich men so that he can make a profit. Rather than the simple cloaks of a beggar, the friar wears expensive clothing.
Merchant	The Merchant outfits himself in fashionable attire, with his multicolored cloak and his forked beard. He is a member of the new, rising middle class that Chaucer the author belongs to. Chaucer says that the Merchant hides being in debt by wearing fancy clothes, but the fact that even Chaucer, a stranger among the company, knows the Merchant's financial troubles indicates that the Merchant does not hide his secrets as well as he thinks he does.
Sergeant	Like the Merchant, the Man of Laws is also a member of the new middle class. He works hard and attempts to pull himself up through merit rather than simply by birth. The Man of Laws wants to join the ranks of the nobility, unlike the Merchant, who wants to rise to prominence in the new bourgeois class.
The Franklin	The Franklin is a free, wealthy landowner, an excellent host who always keeps his table set for a feast. He provides frequent meals and entertainment for the peasants who live on his land. The Franklin leads a pleasant life, following the tenets of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, and his tale speaks of the merits of a marriage based on trust and faith.
Wife of Bath	The Wife of Bath comes from the town of Bath, which is on the Avon River. She is a seamstress by trade but a professional wife by occupation: she has been married five times and presents herself as the world's expert in matters of marriage and the relations between men and women. Chaucer describes her as large, gap-toothed, and dressed in red clothing, which is traditionally the color of lust. The Wife of Bath is a force of nature, a larger-than-life character who is not afraid to push her way to the front and state her opinions.

Parson	Unlike most of the other religious characters in the Tales, the Parson is a sincere and devout priest, devoted to his parishioners. He genuinely practices what he preaches, traveling through rain and shine to the farthest corners of his parish.
Plowman	The Plowman, the Parson's brother, is also a devout Christian, dedicated to his labors. He wears a modest tunic, demonstrating his humble ways, and always pays his tithes in full, showing his devotion to Christ.
Miller	The Miller is a pug-nosed, brawny worker with a red beard and a warty nose. He's a champion wrestler, a thief—Chaucer says that he steals corn from his bosses—and something of a drunkard.
Reeve	In medieval society, a Reeve is a manager of an estate. This Reeve is slender, old, and crabby. Everyone is afraid of him because he knows all the tricks of the trade. The Reeve squirrels away the money that he earns from his landowner; indeed, at this point, he's wealthier than his boss. The Reeve is also a talented carpenter and is extremely offended when the Miller tells his story about a foolish carpenter.
Summoner	The Summoner is another supposedly devout religious figure who is actually a hypocrite. In medieval society, summoners brought people to the ecclesiastical court to confess their sins. He has a disgusting skin disease that makes his face pimpled and scaly. His outside appearance matches his inner corruption: he is very willing to be bribed in exchanged for a full pardon.
Pardoner	The Pardoner, with his mincing, feminine ways and long hair, has been interpreted as potentially homosexual. He carries a full bag of pardons and fake relics from Rome, which he uses to dupe gullible parishioners into giving him money.