Geoffery Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales

Background Information:

1. Chaucer worked as

* Soldier
* Courtier
* Diplomat
* Government official
* Justice of the Peace
* Member of Parliament

1. Born into a mercantile family, Chaucer probably attended a grammar school and most likely studied law at one of the Inns of the Court.
2. Had trouble with the law – accused of “raptus” (Latin for “to seize”; “to capture”)

* by Cecilia Chaumpaigne, daughter of a baker in London
* the case was eventually dropped, and many believe that the government created a “cover up”

1. Early literary works:

* "The Parliament of Fowls"
* reveals influence of Dante Alighieri's INFERNO

1. many critics believe that Boccaccio, another Italian poet, inspired Chaucer to use the frame structure style for CANTERBURY TALES
2. Romance of the Rose

* the "best seller" of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.
* Audiences would recognize that Chaucer imitated the opening lines in his “General Prologue.”

1. “General Prologue”

* Presumably written early in the Canterbury period (late 1380s and early 1390s), thought it was not necessarily the first part of the Tales to be composed and was probably revised from time to time. Some revisions remained to be made (neither the 2nd Nun and Nun’s priest is described.)

1. Purpose of Chaucer’s pilgrimage? His characters plan to visit the grave of Thomas a Becket.

* Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury was murdered on December 29, 1170 in Canterbury Cathedral. Although the great struggles of Church and State in the middle ages were played out between the pope and German emperors, or the popes and French kings, the conflict between Henry II and Becket is a witness of the widespread and localized impact of the conflict.

1. Satire - a piece of literature designed to ridicule the subject of the work. While it can be funny, its aim is not to amuse, but to arouse contempt. Satire arouses laughter or scorn as a means of ridicule and derision, with the avowed intention of correcting human faults.
2. Why is CANTERBURY TALES relevant to us?

* Written in a society that, to some extent, believed you could judge a book by its cover – that the physical characteristics, or the mere category of a person, might reveal something about what was on the inside. In some ways, the pilgrims' portraits in The CANTERBURY TALES confirm the common stereotypes: the lower-class person is extremely physical, the consummate wife is lustful. But, as the Tales progress, these people have the chance to speak for themselves. What happens then isn't exactly a contradiction of the stereotypes about them, but it isn't exactly a confirmation of them, either. As so often happens when you really get to know someone, what you find out in The Canterbury Tales is that people, even the ones we think we have figured out, are never one-dimensional and always worth getting to know better.

1. How does Chaucer break down the classes in *Canterbury Tales*?

* Male Estates:
  + 1st – Clergy
    - Intellectuals (Men of letters) - With the collapse of feudalism, a new subcategory to clergy also developed. They were called "Intellectuals" or "Men of Letters" because they were trained in Church-controlled disciplines of scholarship and writing, but they did not end up with a career within the Church as monks or priests.
  + 2nd – Nobility
  + 3rd – Peasantry
  + 4th – Merchant - the newest estate. It didn’t “fit” into the feudal structure.

\*\*\* Geoffrey Chaucer arguably belonged to both of these new categories (Mercantile and “Intellectual”).\*\*\*\*

* Female Estates:
  + 1st – Virgins
  + 2nd – Wives
  + 3rd – Widows

1. Number of Tales

* Chaucer meant to write 124 Tales, but he died before he could finish the 25th.

1. Frame Tale –

The Frame: the gathering at the Tabard Inn and the Journey to Canterbury.

The Images on the Canvas: the Tales of the Pilgrimage

The Frame includes the General Prologue, other Prologues, and the Pilgrims’ interpretation of the *Tales*

1. He is a character in his own novel, and he writes in the first person as an outside observer traveling with the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury.
2. Point of View:

* The speaker's naive innocence is a literary pose or mask which allows the readers to form their own opinions. It also protects Chaucer, the diplomat. We are forced to read between the lines; thus, the speaker's persona effects satire and irony. He allows characters to reveal their own faults or virtues.

1. Genre forms in the Middle Ages (Each story falls into these genre categories)

•Allegory (Pardoner's Tale)

•Romance (Wife of Bath's Tale; The Knight's Tale)

•Tragedies (The Knight's Tale)

•Fabliaux or bawdy tale (The Miller's Tale)

•Beast Fable (The Nun's Priest's Tale)

•Morality Tale (The Franklin's Tale)

•Homily (The Parson's Tale)

•Saints Tales

1. Organization:

* The arrangement of the tales is significant and suggests contrasts. Look at who tells the story before and after the ones you are assigned. Each character is a type, but each one is also described with unique details that make them memorable.

1. Basic Medieval Medicine:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Humor** | **Type** | **Emotion** | **Element** |
| Blood | Sanguine | Passion | Air (Hot and Moist) |
| Phlegm | Dull | Apathy | Water (Cold and Moist |
| Black Bile | Melancholy | Sullenness | Earth (Cold and Dry) |
| Yellow Bile | Choleric | Irascibility | Fire (Hot and Dry) |

1. Themes:

* Society and Class
* Competition
* Lies and deceit
* Wealth
* Spirituality