

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 traveling companions.

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 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.

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.

The Pilgrims

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.

Read an in-depth analysis of *The Wife of Bath*.

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.

Read an in-depth analysis of *The Pardoner*.

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.

Characters from the Five Tales Analyzed in This SparkNote

The Knight's Tale

Theseus

A great conqueror and the duke of Athens in the Knight's Tale. The most powerful ruler in the story, he is often called upon to make the final judgment, but he listens to others' pleas for help.

Palamon

Palamon is one of the two imprisoned Theban soldier heroes in the Knight's Tale. Brave, strong, and sworn to everlasting friendship with his cousin Arcite, Palamon falls in love with the fair maiden Emelye, which brings him into conflict with Arcite. Though he loses the tournament against Arcite, he gets Emelye in the end.

Arcite

The sworn brother to Palamon, Arcite, imprisoned with Palamon in the tower in the Knight's Tale, falls equally head over heels in love with Emelye. He gets released from the tower early and wins Emelye's hand in a tournament, but then dies when a divinely fated earthquake causes his horse to throw him.

Emelye

Emelye is the sister to Hippolyta, Theseus's domesticated Amazon queen in the Knight's Tale. Fair-haired and glowing, we first see Emelye as Palamon does, through a window. Although she is the object of both Palamon's and Arcite's desire, she would rather spend her life unmarried and childless. Nevertheless, when Arcite wins the tournament, she readily pledges herself to him.

Egeus

Theseus's father. Egeus gives Theseus the advice that helps him convince Palamon and Emelye to end their mourning of Arcite and get married.

The Miller's Tale

Nicholas

In the Miller's Tale, Nicholas is a poor astronomy student who boards with an elderly carpenter, John, and the carpenter's too-young wife, Alisoun. Nicholas dupes John and sleeps with Alisoun right under John's nose, but Absolon, the foppish parish clerk, gets Nicholas in the end.

Alisoun

Alisoun is the sexy young woman married to the carpenter in the Miller's Tale. She is bright and sweet like a small bird, and dresses in a tantalizing style—her clothes are embroidered inside and outside, and she laces her boots high. She willingly goes to bed with Nicholas, but she has only harsh words and obscenities for Absolon.

Absolon

The local parish clerk in the Miller's Tale, Absolon is a little bit foolish and more than a little bit vain. He wears red stockings underneath his floor-length church gown, and his leather shoes are decorated like the fanciful stained-glass windows in a cathedral. He curls his hair, uses breath fresheners, and fancies Alisoun.

John

The dim-witted carpenter to whom Alisoun is married and with whom Nicholas boards. John is jealous and possessive of his wife. He constantly berates Nicholas for looking into God's "pryvetee," but when Nicholas offers John the chance to share his knowledge, John quickly accepts. He gullibly believes Nicholas's pronouncement that a second flood is coming, which allows Nicholas to sleep with John's wife.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

The First Three Husbands

The Wife of Bath says that her first three husbands were "good" because they were rich and old. She could order them around, use sex to get what she wanted, and trick them into believing lies.

The Fourth Husband

The Wife of Bath says comparatively little about her fourth husband. She loved him, but he was a reveler who had a mistress. She had fun singing and dancing with him, but tried her best to make him jealous. She fell in love with her fifth husband, Jankyn, while she was still married to her fourth.

Jankyn

The Wife of Bath's fifth husband, Jankyn, was a twenty-year-old former student, with whom the Wife was madly in love. His stories of wicked wives frustrated her so much that one night she ripped a page out of his book, only to receive a deafening smack on her ear in return.

The Knight

Arthur's young knight rapes a maiden, and, to avoid the punishment of death, he is sent by the queen on a quest to learn about submission to women. Once he does so, and shows that he has learned his lesson by letting his old ugly wife make a decision, she rewards him by becoming beautiful and submissive.

Read an in-depth analysis of The Knight.

The Old Woman

The old woman supplies the young knight with the answer to his question, in exchange for his promise to do whatever she wants. When she tells him he must marry her, the knight begrudgingly agrees, and when he allows her to choose whether she would like to be beautiful and unfaithful or ugly and faithful, she rewards him by becoming both beautiful and faithful.

Arthur's Queen

Arthur's queen, presumably Guinevere, is interesting because she wields most of the power. When Arthur's knight rapes a maiden, he turns the knight over to his queen allows her to decide what to do with him.

The Pardoner's Tale

The Three Rioters

These are the three protagonists of the Pardoner's Tale. All three indulge in and represent the vices against which the Pardoner has railed in his Prologue: Gluttony, Drunkenness, Gambling, and Swearing. These traits define the three and eventually lead to their downfall. The Rioters at first appear like personified vices, but it is their belief that a personified concept—in this case, Death—is a real person that becomes the root cause of their undoing.

The Old Man

In the Pardoner's Tale, the three Rioters encounter a very old man whose body is completely covered except for his face. Before the old man tells the Rioters where they can find "Death," one of the Rioters rashly demands why the old man is still alive. The old man answers that he is doomed to walk the earth for eternity. He has been interpreted as Death itself, or as Cain, punished for fratricide by walking the earth forever; or as the Wandering Jew, a man who refused to let Christ rest at his house when Christ proceeded to his crucifixion, and who was therefore doomed to roam the world, through the ages, never finding rest.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

Chanticleer

The heroic rooster of the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chanticleer has seven hen-wives and is the most handsome cock in the barnyard. One day, he has a prophetic dream of a fox that will carry him away. Chanticleer is also a bit vain about his clear and accurate crowing voice, and he unwittingly allows a fox to flatter him out of his liberty.

Pertelote

Chanticleer's favorite wife in the Nun's Priest's Tale. She is his equal in looks, manners, and talent. When Chanticleer dreams of the fox, he awakens her in the middle of the night, begging for an interpretation, but Pertelote will have none of it, calling him foolish. When the fox takes him away, she mourns him in classical Greek fashion, burning herself and wailing.

The Fox

The orange fox, interpreted by some as an allegorical figure for the devil, catches Chanticleer the rooster through flattery. Eventually, Chanticleer outwits the fox by encouraging him to boast of his deceit to his pursuers. When the fox opens his mouth, Chanticleer escapes.

Knight

A worthy man, good christian, very honorable, wears armor in battle, a tunic out of battle, and crusaded against Muslims. Aristocrat; wore a tunic; truthful, honest, distinguishable, chivalrous, full of honor, generous, noble, incorruptible, fought in only religious war

Squire

20 years of age, rode a horse, very athletic, well rounded, liked to sing, and was son of the knight. lover, strong, tries to impress his lover, sings, wears a short gown with long wide sleeves, likes to joust and dance and draw and write, courteous, aristocrat; curly hair, sings, dances; desperately wanted to please the knight.

Yeoman

Traveled solo, wore all green, had chivalry, had peacock feather arrows, good hunter, and was an archer. A knight well-equipped for war, wore a bracelet on his arm, small head, was "a proper forester", servant to the knight

Prioress

Fair lady, neat cloak, sang in church, was very clean, very religious, and was a nun, Madam Eglantyne; wears a gold brooch; good manners, speaks french, pleasant, friendly, entertaining, gentle, well educated, delicate, could not stand pain, had 3 dogs and treated them very well

Nun

Nun that came with the Prioress

Priest

Priest that came with the Prioress

Monk

Fine cloaks, devoted to god, gray fur coat, shiny head, and bald. Rode horses, had a lovers' knot on his coat, obese; liked to hunt, did not stay in his cloister, manly, old, strict, sound views, fat, jolly, had horses and gray hounds for hunting, not good at what he does, vain

Friar

Helped many girls get married after he got them in trouble. When he heard confessions, he worked under the principle that penance is best executed by money. Knew taverns and inns better than the leper houses, always was able to get money from the parishioners, tricky, dishonest, and an all around beggar. Name: Hubert; well dressed; gave gifts to young women. qualified to hear confessions, sweet, sings well, finest beggar

Merchant

Had elegant boots, a beard, was very rich, and sold things, used wits to get a sale, shrewd.

Oxford Cleric

A seller, humble lifestyle, a kind-of librarian, and was a philosopher. Student; middle class; read books, prayed, thin, would not talk often, but when he did it was with great dignity and moral virtue. One of the most admired people on the pilgrimage.

Sergeant at the Law

lawyer, makes a lot of money, wears a gird with a silken belt, part of Inns of Court, great memory, makes people think he is busier and wiser than he really is,

Franklin

wealthy landowner, lives in pleasure, open to guests, full house of food and wine, has a dagger and a little silk purse on his girdle, devoted energies to fine living, generally liked by other pilgrims

Haberdasher

hat and clothing maker; one of the 5 guildsmen "of one impressive guild-fraternity" (middle class)

Dyer

dyes fabric and leather; one of the 5 guildsmen "of one impressive guild-fraternity" (middle class)

Carpenter

a woodworker who makes or repairs wooden objects; one of the 5 guildsmen "of one impressive guild-fraternity" (middle class)

Weaver

makes fabric; one of the 5 guildsmen "of one impressive guild-fraternity" (middle class)

Carpet-maker

makes large, intricate woven pictures which are decorative and expensive; one of the 5 guildsmen "of one impressive guild-fraternity" (middle class)

Cook

Was begged to, and could whip up a delicious pie or soup. really good at what he does, lonely, has an ulcer or soar on his knee, master of his trade

Skipper

Wore thick rough cloth, moderately rich, Drank, worked hard and long, good fellow, had a dagger, could fight but not ride a horse, worked on a boat, from Dartmouth, has a beard, wore a woolen gown, brown skin

Doctor

speaks well, great at what he does, knows Greek mythology, knew astrology, doesn't read the bible much, wears red garments, he cares a lot about money, the people who help him do it for money, not to help others, made a lot of money during the plague, special love of gold

Wife of Bath

Weaved expensive cloth, had a fair face, giggly, huge hat, wore a robe on her buttox. gap teeth, large hips, lusty, humorous, liked to travel; had five husbands, somewhat deaf, has lots of money, big hips, round, gap-teeth, had scarlet red stockings, rode horse easily, had remedies of love (obsessed with sex...)

Parson

Head of a parish, very poor, was given a house, a protestant pastor. preacher, smart, gives to the poor, respected by Chaucer, rather give money to parishioners than to make them pay. he wanted to live perfect life first and then teach it. life was example of a true christian. Ideal portrait of a parish priest.

Plowman

Ideal christian man. Lived in perfect peace and charity. Loved god and his neighbor, worried, worked long and hard, plowed dung and dirt, brother of Parson, loves God, does the dirty work, has nothing to hide, honest, loyal to the church, pious, simple

Miller

Worked at a mill, very strong, big nose and mouth, red bearded, chunky and large. Peasant class; big, brawny, wart on nose; jokester, sells stolen corn for profit, rich man, broad knotty shoulders, wrangler, buffoon, master at stealing grain, scam, played bagpipes

Manciple

steward for law school, illiterate, street-smart, debt-free, steals, dishonest, frugal, hard worker, outsmarted people he had worked for

Reeve

Very deceitful, In charge of all serfs, and is a serf himself. feared, was a carpenter, knows all the scams, when lord is gone, skinny man with bad temper, once a carpenter and rode last, shrewd man who made money from unrelenting perseverance

Summoner

Summons sinners to court, scares children with his ugly looks. pimple-covered, scaly infection, moth-eaten beard, children were afraid of him, dumb, if you pay him with wine, he lets you get away with sins, could quote a few lines of Latin to impress people, well acquainted with ladies of questionable reputation, physical appearance fits his profession, summons from him is a horrible experience

Pardoner

Authority to sell pardons and indulgences for those charged with sins, had a bag full of pardons he planned to sell for profits, High-pitch voiced, couldn't grow a beard, he was said to be castrated waxy yellow hair, pretends to pardon people from their sins for money, yellow, waxy, rat-tail hair; he sold pardons for sins, and he sold fake relics, persuasive, most corrupt of the churchmen, not really a man implying he is perverted or sexually impotent

Chaucer

In England, he was a courtier, who traveled and mastered philosophy and literature. He wrote from the perspective of various pilgrims to a tomb, and uses them as individuals representing many different walks of life. He thus subtly commented on cultural, religious and literary traditions. Both the author and pilgrim of the story