




Geoffrey Chaucer's
The Canterbury Tales

ENGLISH LITERATURE (I) WEEK 5



Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387- 1400)¹

- William Langland's *Piers Plowman* as an Allegory: Do Good/Do Better/Do Best
- Dream Vision: "Dream of the Rood" (Cynewulf, 8th Century)
- Direct Homely Language
- First-Personal Narrator
- ¹ Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Trans. David Wright. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.




Alliterative Revival


- Old English and Alliteration: Stresses and Caesura (2,2/3 stresses)
- 1066 Norman Conquest: Greek and Roman (French)
- Langland: Alliterative Revival in Western England (Countryside)




The Beginning of *Piers Plowman*

- In a summer season when the sun was mild
- I clad myself in clothes as I'd become a sheep;
- In the habit of a hermit unholy of works,
- Walked wide in this world, watching for wonders.

- 
- And on a May morning, on Malvern Hills,
 - There befell me as by magic a marvelous thing;
 - I was weary of wandering and went to rest
 - At the bottom of a broad bank by a brook's side,
 - And as I lay lazily looking in the water

- 
- I slipped into a slumber, it sounded so pleasant.
 - There came to me reclining there a most curious dream
 - That I was in a wilderness, nowhere that I knew;
 - But as I looked into the east, up high toward the sun,

- 
- I saw a tower on a hill-top, trimly built,
 - A deep dale beneath, a dungeon tower in it,
 - With ditches deep and dark and dreadful to look at,
 - A fair field full of folk I found between them,
 - Of human beings of all sorts, the high and the low
 - Working and wandering as the world requires.



The Canterbury Tales


- Language: Vernacular Literature (London)
- Church: A Roman Catholic
- The Seven Deadly Sin: The Miller's Tale (Lust), The Nun's Priest's Tale (Pride)
- Structure of *The Canterbury Tales*



General Prologue


When the sweet showers of April have pierced
The drought of March, and pierced it to the root,
And every vein is bathed in that moisture
Whose quickening force will engender the flower;
And when the west wind too with its sweet breath
Has given life in every wood and field

>>NEXT



To tender shoots, and when the stripling sun
Has run his half-course in Aries, the Ram,
And when small birds are making melodies,
That sleep all the night long with open eyes,
(Nature so prompts them, and encourages);
Then people long to go on pilgrimages,
And palmers to take ship for foreign shores.

>>NEXT



And distant shrines, famous in different lands;
And most especially, from all the shires
Of England, to Canterbury they come,
The holy blessed martyr there to seek,
Who gave his help to them when they were sick.



Question 1

- Dryden claims that Chaucer is the Father of English poetry. Even though what we have comes from David Wright's translation. Can you see the rhyme scheme of the above lines?



Place and Pilgrims, Lines 19-26

It so happened at this season, that one day
In Southwark at the Tabard where I stayed
Ready to set out on my pilgrimage
To Canterbury, and pay devout homage,
There came at nightfall to the hostelry
Some nine-and-twenty in a company,
Folk of all kinds, met in accidental
Companionship, for they were pilgrims all;



Question 2

- Why is the device of pilgrim good for Chaucer to portray his society?



The Knight, Lines 42-78

And with a knight, then, I shall first begin.

There was a knight, a reputable man,
Who from the moment that he first began
Campaigning, had cherished the profession
Of arms; he also prized trustworthiness,
Liberality, fame, and courteousness.

>>NEXT



In the king's service he'd fought valiantly,

And traveled far; no man as far as he


In Christian and in heathen lands as well,

.....

Fought for our faith, and each time killed his man.

.....

>>NEXT



But as for his appearance and outfit,
He had good horses, yet was from from smart.
He wore a tunic made of coarse thick stuff,
Marked by his chainmail, all begrimed with rust,
Having just returned from an expedition,
And on his pilgrimage of thanksgiving.



Question 3

- In *Piers Plowman*, Peter the plowman knows the way to Truth and acts as the guide. Still, Peter will not take people (including a knight) to see Truth before everyone has done his/her own job. For himself, Peter will first plow his own half-acre of land. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the leader of the pilgrims is the knight. What criticism might William Langland aim at Chaucer's knight?



The Knight's Squire, Lines 79-99

With him there was his son, a young squire,
A lively knight-apprentice, and a lover,
With hair as curly as if newly waved;
I took him to be twenty years of age.

.....
He'd taken part in cavalry forays
.....

>>NEXT



His clothes were all embroidered like a field
Full of the freshest flowers, white and red.
He sang, or played the flute, the livelong day,
.....
Polite, modest, willing to serve, and able,



The Yeoman, Lines 101-11

- The Knight had just one servant, a yeoman,
- For so he wished to ride, on this occasion.
- The man was clad in coat and hood of green.
- He carried under his belt, handily,
- For he looked to his gear in yeoman fashion,



- A sheaf of peacock arrows, sharp and shining,
-
- And on his breast a medal: St. Christopher,
- The woodman's patron saint, in polished silver.
- He bore a horn slung from a cord of green,
- And my guess is, he was a forester.




The Nun, Lines 118-65

There was also a nun, a prioress,
.....

And she spoke French well and elegantly
As she'd been taught it at Stratford-at-Bow,
For French of Paris was to her unknown.
Good table manners she had learnt as well:

>>NEXT




She never let a crumb from her mouth fall;
She never soiled her fingers, dipping deep
Into the sauce; when lifting to her lips

.....

Her greatest pleasure was in etiquette.


>>NEXT



She used to wipe her upper lip so clean,
No print of grease inside her cup was seen,
.....

Her demeanour was so pleasant, and so warm;
Though at pains to ape the manners of the court,
.....


>>NEXT



She was so full of charity and pity
That if she saw a mouse caught in a trap,
And it was dead or bleeding, she would weep.
She kept some little dogs, and these she fed
On roast meat, or on milk and fine white bread.

.....

>>NEXT



She carried on her arm; and from it hung
A brooch of shining gold; inscribed thereon
Was, first of all, a crowned 'A',
And under, *Amor vincit omnia*.

With her were three priests, and another nun,
Who was her chaplain and companion.



The Monk, Lines 165-206

There was a monk, a nonpareil was he,
Who rode, as steward of his monastery,
The country round; a lover of good sport,
A manly man, and fit to be an abbot.
He'd plenty of good horses in his stable,
And when he went out riding, you could hear
His bridle jingle in the wind, as clear
And loud as the monastery chapel-bell.


>>NEXT



.....
This monk I speak of let old precepts slide,
And took the modern practice as his guide.
He didn't give so much as a plucked hen
For the maxim, 'Hunters are not pious men',
.....

I noticed that his sleeves were edged and trimmed
With squirrel fur, the finest in the land.

>>NEXT



For fastening his hood beneath his chin,
He wore an elaborate golden pin,
Twined with a love-knot at the larger end

.....

A roast swan was what he loved the best.



The Friar, Lines 208-13, 244-48

There was a begging friar, a genial merry
.....

In all of the four Orders there was none
So versed in small talk and in flattery:
Any many was the marriage in a hurry
He'd had to improvise and even pay for.

>>NEXT



.....

It wouldn't do, for on his his position,
One of his ability and distinction,
To hold acquaintance with diseased lepers.
It isn't seemly, and it gets you nowhere,
To have any dealings with that sort of trash,



Question 4


- Can you explain how Chaucer attacks the medieval church humorously?



The Scholar, Lines 287-310

There was a scholar from Oxford as well,
Not yet an MA, reading Logic still;
The horse he rode was leaner than a rake,
And he himself, believe me, none too fat,
But hollow-cheeked, and grave and serious.


>>NEXT



Threadbare indeed was his short overcoat:
A man too unworldly for lay office,
Yet he'd not got himself a benefice.
For he'd much rather have at his bedside
A library, bound in black calf or red,

.....

>>NEXT




He never spoke a word more than was need,
And that was said in form and decorum,
And brief and terse, and full of deepest meaning.
Moral virtue was reflected in his speech,
And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.



The Wife of Bath, Lines 447-78


There was a business woman, from near Bath,
But more's the pity, she was a bit deaf;
So skilled a clothmaker, that she outdistanced
Even the weavers of Ypres and Ghent.

>>NEXT




In the whole parish there was not a woman
Who dared precede her at the almsgiving,
And if there did, so furious was she,
That she was put out of all charity.

>>NEXT




Her headkerchiefs were of the finest weave,
Ten pounds and more they weighed, I do believe,
Those that she wore on Sundays on her head.
Her stockings were of finest scarlet red,
Very tightly laced; shoes pliable and new.
Bold was her face, and handsome; florid too.

>>NEXT



She had been respectable all her life,
And five times married, that's to say in church,
Not counting other loves she'd had in youth.
Of whom, just now, there is no need to speak.

>>NEXT



A riding-skirt round her enormous hips,
Also a pair of sharp spurs on her feet.
In company, how she could laugh and joke!
No doubt she knew of all the cures for love,
For at that game she was a past mistress.



Question 5


- Chaucer's language is very suggestive. What is Chaucer's attitude toward this famous wife of Bath?



The Priest, Lines 479-534

And there was a good man, a religious.
He was the needy priest of a village,
But rich enough in saintly thought and work.
And educated, too, for he could read;
Would truly preach the word of Jesus Christ,
.....
He practiced first what later he would teach.

>>NEXT



.....

He never let his benefice for hire
And left his sheep to flounder in the mire
While he ran off to London, to St Paul's
To seek some chantry and sing mass for souls,
Or to be kept as chaplain by a guild;

>>NEXT



But stayed at home, and took care of his fold

.....

With him there was his brother, a ploughman,
Who'd fetched and carried many a load of dung;
A good and faithful labourer was he,
Living in peace and perfect charity.




The Miller, Lines 547-65

The miller was a burly fellow—brawn
And muscle, big of bones as well as strong.

.....

He was barrel-chested, rugged and thickset,
And would heave off its hinges any door
Or break it, running at it with his head.

>>NEXT



His beard was red as any fox or sow,
And wide at that, as though it were a spade,
And on his nose, right on its tip, he had
A wart, upon which stood a tuft of hairs
Red as the bristles are in a sow's ears.


.....

Well versed in stealing corn and trebling dues,
He had a golden thumb



The Summoner, Lines 625-53

- A Summoner was among us at the inn,
- Whose face was fire-red, like the cherubim;
- All covered with carbuncles; his eyes narrow;
-
- A most engaging rascal, and a kind,

- 
- As good a fellow as you'd hope to find:
 - For he'd allow—given a quart of wine—
 - A scallywag to keep his concubine
 - A twelvemonth, and excuse him altogether.



The Pardon-Seller, Lines 671-706

With him [the summoner] there was a peerless
pardon-seller

.....


Who'd come straight from the Vatican in Rome.

Loudly he sang, "Come to me, love, come hither!"

.....


His voice was like a goat's, plaintive and then.

>>NEXT



He had no beard, nor was he like to have;
Smooth was his face, as if he had just shaved.
I took him for a gelding or a mare.
As for his trade, from Berwick down to Ware
You'd not find such another pardon-seller.
For in his bag he had a pillowcase
Which had been, so he said, Our Lady's veil;

>>NEXT



.....

But with these relics, when he came upon
Some poor up-country priest or backwoods parson,
In just one day he'd pick up far more money
Than any parish priest was like to see
In two whole months.



Question 6

- Chaucer praises a priest, but he attacks a friar, a monk, a nun, and a pardon-seller. In your opinion, what might be Chaucer's attitude toward the Church?



Chaucer's Realism, Lines 727-38


But first I beg you, not to put it down

To my ill-breeding if my speech be plain

When telling what they looked like, what they said,


Or if I use the exact words they used.

>>NEXT





For, as you all must know as well as I,
To tell a tale told by another man
You must repeat as nearly as you can
Each word, if that's the task you've undertaken,

>>NEXT



However coarse or broad his language is;
Or, in the telling, you'll have to distort it
Or make things up, or find new words for it.
You can't hold back, even if he's your brother.

- 
- Whatever word is used, you must use also.
 - Christ Himself spoke out plain in Holy Writ,
 - And well you know there's nothing wrong with that.
 - Plato, as those who read him know, has said,
 - 'The word must be related to the deed.'

- 
- Also I beg you to forgive it me
 - If I overlooked all standing and degree
 - As regards the order in which people come
 - Here in this tally, as I set them down:
 - My wits are none too bright, as you can see.




Question 7


- Chaucer claims to be realistic in his description of the pilgrims. He also tries to justify himself for his use of coarse language. Do you agree with his self-defense?



The Host and the Rule, Lines 790-808

- ‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ began our host,
- ‘Do yourselves a good turn, and hear me out:
- But please don’t turn your noses up at it.
- I’ll put it in a nutshell: here’s the nub:
- It’s that you each, to shorten the long journey,

- 
- Shall tell two tales en route to Canterbury,
 - And coming homeward, tell another two,
 - Stories of things that happened long ago.
 - Whoever best aquits himself, and tells
 - The most amusing and instructive tale,
 - Shall have a dinner, paid for by us all,
 - Here in this inn, and under this roof-tree,

- 
- When we come back again from Canterbury.
 - To make it the more fun, I'll gladly ride
 - With you at my own cost, and be your guide.
 - And anyone who disputes what I say
 - Must pay all our expenses on the way!