

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Canterbury Tales

by Geoffrey Chaucer

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Disclaimer

This Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Teaching Unit corresponds to the *Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classics* version of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The selected tales in this book have been translated into Modern English and reproduced in their entirety. Some tales contain sexual material that may not be appropriate for some classes.

The Canterbury Tales

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to

1. evaluate *The Canterbury Tales* in terms of its historical context, as well its importance and appeal to modern-day readers.
2. analyze the use of humor, wit, and sarcasm in the tales.
3. identify the characteristics of an English romance, *fabliau*, *exemplum*, and beast fable and analyze how various tales function as examples of these genres.
4. examine the use of verbal, dramatic, and situational irony in the tales.
5. analyze feminist and anti-feminist messages within the text.
6. evaluate the ways Chaucer uses metaphor, simile, personification, allusion, and imagery in the text.
7. analyze the ways Chaucer uses characterization and establishes diverse and unique narrative voices.
8. discuss the different rhetorical levels in the text.
9. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
11. offer a close reading of *The Canterbury Tales* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the collection.

The Canterbury Tales

Lecture Notes

CHAUCEUR'S LIFE

Many English scholars and literature aficionados consider Chaucer one of the greatest English writers of the Medieval Period. Aside from authoring *The Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and several other notable poems, Chaucer was an active civil servant, and because of his mark on the public record, modern scholars know a good deal about his life, even though he lived more than six hundred years ago.

He is also dearly remembered as among the first writers to write “serious literature” in English vernacular rather than in the customary Latin or French.

Chaucer was born sometime around 1343 to John Chaucer and Agnes Copton, vintners who owned property outside of London. We know little about Chaucer's education, but it is clear from the allusions he makes in his writing that he studied Greek and Latin poetry, particularly that of Homer, Ovid, and Virgil.

As a young man, Chaucer was a servant in the household of Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Ulster and wife of Prince Lionel, the Duke of Clarence. In the early years of the Hundred Years' War, in which King Edward III attempted to take the French throne, Chaucer accompanied Prince Lionel and his men to the continent. In 1360, one year after joining the military, Chaucer was captured and ransomed for £16, which Edward III paid.

When Chaucer returned to England, he served as a valet in the king's household. There, he met Philippa de Roet, one of the queen's attendants, and they married in 1366. They had four children together: Thomas, Lewis, Agnes, and Elizabeth. While raising his family, Chaucer continued his dutiful service to the king. In 1374, Edward promised him a gallon pitcher of wine a day for life, a generous gift, which the king maintained until his death in 1377. Edward's successor, Richard II, resumed the act, but he allowed Chaucer to exchange the wine for twenty marks instead.

Chaucer also took on additional positions, including the Comptroller of the Port of London, a job given to him in 1374, which involved collecting customs on wool, leather, and sheepskin. He also frequently traveled to Europe, visiting Picardy, Florence, and Genoa in his lifetime. In 1377, he journeyed to France under the king's orders, where he supposedly assisted in the attempt to arrange a marriage between Richard II and a French princess. Because of his travels, Chaucer was able to study French and Italian poetry, both of which influenced his work.

On October 25, 1400, Chaucer died from unknown causes. Some scholars believe that he was murdered by enemies of King Richard II, but there is not substantial evidence to support this claim. Chaucer was buried in the Westminster Abbey, and in 1556, his remains were moved to what has now been named the Poet's Corner, the South Transept of the abbey where other famous writers, including Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Edmund Spenser, and Ben Jonson, are interred.

The Canterbury Tales

The General Prologue

1. Why might the time of year during which this collection is set be significant?

2. Recall from the Introduction that medieval philosophy saw the universe as a carefully ordered hierarchy, with God (unmoving and unchanging) at the highest level, and nature (the world of change, movement, and birth and death) at the bottom. How are people and nature connected in these opening lines?

3. What might be Chaucer's intent in comparing humankind and nature?

4. From what point of view is *The Canterbury Tales* told? What effect will this have on the tales themselves?

5. How does Chaucer describe the Knight?

6. How does the Squire compare to his father, the Knight?

The Knight's Tale: Part One

1. What kind of people is this story about? What does this tell us about the storyteller?

2. Where is the story set? Why is this significant?

3. How does Chaucer's diction when talking about Theseus reinforce the idea that Theseus won Hippolyta in a battle?

4. How does the relationship between Hippolyta and Theseus differ from courtly love?

5. What characteristics of Theseus are presented in the following quotation?

Do you so much as envy
My honour that you thus complain and cry?
Or who has wronged you now, or who offended?
Come, tell me whether it may be amended;
And tell me, why are you clothed thus in black? (49 – 53)

The Miller's Tale

- 1. What are the character types the Miller sets up in the beginning of the story? How do the character types influence what the reader expects of the story?

- 2. What objects in Nicholas's room does Chaucer mention, and what do you think his purpose is for listing them?

- 3. What is ironic about Nicholas's hobbies?

- 4. How does the age difference between John and his wife affect their relationship?

- 5. How might John's life have been different if he had read Cato?

- 6. How and why does Chaucer describe John's wife in terms of animals?

“The Tale of the Wife of Bath”

1. What is the significance of the setting of this tale?

2. How does the Wife of Bath use hyperbole for humor in the opening to her tale?

3. How does King Arthur’s character compare to Duke Theseus’s, and what do the similarities between the two rulers say about ideal leadership?

4. What does the interaction between King Arthur and the ladies, in addition to the interaction between Duke Theseus and the women, say about the correlation between gender and how well a person can sympathize with others?

5. How do the wrong answers to the queen’s question introduce stereotypes about women? Does the Wife of Bath agree or disagree with these stereotypes?

6. What comic trait does the Wife of Bath’s digression about King Midas illustrate?

“The Pardoner’s Tale”

1. What is ironic about the way in which the Pardoner begins his tale?

2. To what effect does Chaucer use biblical allusion in the beginning of the tale?

3. How does the Pardoner blame gluttony for the fall of man?

4. How does the passage between lines 258 and 276 emphasize the different ways the young and the old view Death?

5. In what way is the old man’s directive to go up the “crooked way” (299) an example of a pun?

6. How do the following lines compare to the paraphrase of Juvenal in “The Pardoner’s Prologue”?

For men would say that we were robbers strong,
And we’d, for our own treasure, hang ere long.
This treasure must be carried home by night
All prudently and slyly, out of sight. (327 – 330)

“The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”

1. From the opening of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, what kind of story does it seem to be? What kind of characters does it have, and are they like the characters in the previous stories?

2. What is the most likely motivation for the Priest to begin his tale with a description of the widow and her home? What type of story does the Priest’s audience most likely expect?

3. Given the Priest’s description of Chanticleer, what vice might we suspect the rooster will possess?

4. As the Priest develops the relationship between Chanticleer and Pertelote, what common theme emerges?

5. How does the narrator create humor in Chanticleer and Pertelote’s conversation about the dream?

6. What logical fallacy does Pertelote resort to in order to assuage Chanticleer’s fear?
