

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Canterbury Tales

by Geoffrey Chaucer

written by Amber Reed

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The Canterbury Tales

Note to the Teacher

CHAUCER'S USE OF OFFENSIVE MATERIAL: Teachers not familiar with Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* may want to read this section carefully before assigning student reading. Some students may see only the coarse and vulgar aspect of *The Miller's Tale* without seeing its redeeming qualities, and the teacher may wish to prepare students or simply not assign this tale.

All page numbers refer to the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Press Edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, copyright 2005.

The Canterbury Tales

Background Lecture

GEOFFREY CHAUCER (1343 – 1400)

Chaucer's father, John Chaucer, was an influential wine merchant who was able to secure his son a position in the household of Elizabeth de Burgh, daughter-in-law to King Edward III. Chaucer's duties as a page were humble, but they allowed him the opportunity to observe the aristocracy, thus broadening his knowledge of the various social classes. When Lionel, the Earl of Luster and husband to Elizabeth, went to war, Chaucer followed. Chaucer was captured and held prisoner in France, but was soon ransomed for sixteen pounds.

After his release, Chaucer held a number of government positions. While in his twenties, he began writing poetry. Over the years, his writing showed increasing sophistication and depth, and it is recognized as presenting penetrating insights into human character. According to critics, *The Canterbury Tales* shows an absolute mastery of the art of storytelling. Canterbury, located about fifty miles southeast of London, was a favorite destination for pilgrims. In fact, Chaucer himself made a pilgrimage there, and he was so impressed by the mix of company at the Tabard Inn that he was inspired to write what was to become his masterpiece.

The Canterbury Tales

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the individual personalities of the pilgrims and comment on those personality features that could be called “universal character traits.”
2. identify those characteristics of the pilgrims that represent some of the virtues and vices found in Chaucer’s society.
3. explain the role that social class plays in *The Canterbury Tales*.
4. point out examples of Chaucer’s humor and, from these examples, draw a generalization as to how Chaucer created his humor.
5. define satire and discuss the kind of satire seen in *The Canterbury Tales*.
6. define the term allusion and provide examples from the text.
7. cite comments and/or incidents from *The Knight’s Tale* which depict the theme of free will versus Divine Providence.
8. distinguish between various genres, including romance, fabliau, fable, and sermon.
9. discuss life in the medieval period as portrayed in *The Canterbury Tales*.
10. cite examples of Chaucer’s criticism of the Catholic Church.
11. consider the position of women in medieval European society.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

1. Show that the presentation of figures in *The General Prologue* ranges from gentle criticism of human failings to a stronger criticism that exposes, and perhaps condemns, serious misbehavior.
2. List the pilgrims according to their social rank; specify their secular or religious classification.
3. Discuss the framework of *The Canterbury Tales* and compare it to a modern story or movie with a similar framework.

THE KNIGHT'S TALE

1. Explain the aspects associated with the medieval code of chivalry.
2. Discuss the theme of friendship in its various forms as depicted in this tale.
3. Why do you suppose that Chaucer uses ancient Greece as the setting for *The Knight's Tale*? Support your generalizations with examples from the text.
4. Explain what "the code of courtly love" involves and illustrate your explanation with examples from the text.

THE MILLER'S TALE

1. Compare and contrast *The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*.
2. Identify and comment on the role of biblical allusions in *The Miller's Tale*.
3. In what way does the tale match the miller's persona?
4. Based on the tale, do you suppose that May/December marriages were popular during the medieval era?

The General Prologue

Vocabulary

alderman – a local official
anon – soon
apothecaries – pharmacists
array – dress
aught – any
aye – ever
choleric – irritable
churl – rude man
dais – a platform
ere – before
farthing – a coin
gelding – a castrated horse
haberdasher – hat-maker
martyr – a person who chooses to die for his or her faith.
naught – nothing
nones – occasion
palmers – pilgrims
penance – forgiveness
pittance – a small fee
prelate – a priest
shire – village
sooth – truth
sundry – various
swink – toil
trow – believe
wanton – carefree, reckless
whelp – a puppy
wight – man
withal – with
Yeoman – a high-ranking servant
Zephyr – the west wind

1. Who narrates the prologue, and what is the purpose of the prologue?

The Knight's Tale

INTRODUCTION

The Knight's Tale portrays the concepts of chivalry and divine providence that were popular during the Middle Ages. The conventions of courtly love are depicted by the gallant knight who adores the beautiful, yet unattainable, noblewoman from afar. As time passes, the knight suffers from an unrequited love that does not wane. Palamon performs deeds for Emily's sake while suffering from her indifference. Arcita wins Emily's favor through battle, but never consummates his love. Ultimately, the gods intervene in the outcome of these events, portraying divine providence, or the concept that mankind's fate is preordained.

Chaucer combines Christian and pagan elements in *The Knight's Tale*. Theseus makes reference to God and His providence; ironically, an allusion is also made to the mythological tale of Theseus' confrontation with Hades, god of the underworld. Theseus also puts aside his pagan-based traditions of war and vengeance to promote the Christian ideologies of love, peace, and forgiveness; despite his efforts, the outcome is determined by Greek gods.

Chaucer's tale is a shortened version of *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia* by Giovanni Boccaccio. Over two centuries later, *The Knight's Tale* would serve as inspiration for William Shakespeare in writing *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

17. Describe the chain reaction that Nicholas' scream begins.

18. What do the townspeople think?

19. There are a number of contrasts between *The Miller's Tale* and *The Knight's Tale*. Contrast the depictions of love, promises, social class, and the nature of women in the two stories.

20. Based on *The Miller's Tale*, would you infer that May / December weddings, or marriages between older, often rich, men and young, pretty women, were socially acceptable during Chaucer's time?
