Our Classrooms and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales:* How to Make Them Work Together

Stephanie D. Willocks
Ware County High School
Waycross, Georgia

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is widely studied in high school British literature courses. Creative and motivational exercises to aid in the instruction of Chaucer's work can be hard to find. Fortunately, I was able to find and successfully use an activity that brings the literature to life in the Vocational/Technical English classroom. In Vocational/Technical English the classroom becomes a training ground—training for vocational/technical schooling or the workplace. Writing in such courses focuses on memos, letters seeking information, or resumes with some creative writing also included. These courses, because of curricular demands, must also take on the task of studying literature and making it applicable to the context of the rest of the course. To meet all of these expectations, many teachers find themselves performing a balancing act of activities. Few lessons tie in so many of the vocational/technical objectives as well as the Chaucer lesson described below. Although I use the following activity with vocational/technical classes, it can easily be used as a post-reading activity in any high school English course studying the prologue of *The Canterbury Tales.*

CHARACTERIZATION IN CHAUCER

After the class has read *The Canterbury Tales'* prologue, I pay special attention to the fact that many of the characters are identified by their occupation or trade, and that none are given names. For example, some of Chaucer's characters are The Friar, The Monk, The Knight, The Nun, and The Pardoner. I have my students try to come up with reasonable explanations for this method of characterization. Was Chaucer attempting to form stereotypes based on occupations? Was using job titles simply easier than creating names for his characters? Was Chaucer identifying people by their occupation because it was customary for the time period? Through these kinds of questions, students usually become interested in hearing more about the historical context of Chaucer's work.

We then turn to the issue of whether or not we also identify people by their form of employment, and if so, why? Doctors and coaches are two obvious examples of occupation titles that we attach to people as identification. How do we perceive doctors? What character traits do we tend to assume in coaches? The students quickly begin to realize that our society expects certain behavior, categorizes people, and sometimes even displays prejudices based simply on a career choice. After this discussion we then return to Chaucer's prologue to see if we can find stereotypes or prejudices in his characterization. After a thorough discussion of our reading, we are ready to move on to our post-reading activity.

CREATING CHARACTERS

The first step of this activity is to have each student bring in a photograph of someone from a newspaper or a magazine. I always suggest to the class that the photo be of someone they do not recognize because their assignments will involve actually creating original characters. Also, the person in the picture should be of the same sex as the particular student because each student will later take on the identity of the character created. After we have the pictures, we begin to develop our characters from the photographs. Each student then works to make his or her character come to life. Beginning with a detailed physical description, then adding some personality quirks and family matters, the students create their own unique characters. The obvious physical characteristics such as height, weight, age, eye color, etc. are fairly easy for the students to create. Students use their physical descriptions to aid in their characters' personality development. Students must also decide on the form of employment their character has—since this is the key to tying the activity to Chaucer.

CREATING STORIES

The next step involves the students in creating stories that their characters might have to tell. This is the most difficult stage for many students because they usually want more guidance. The only prompts I give them are that the story can be a personal experience of the characters or simply a tale the character may have heard before and wants to pass on to others for entertainment. I do set a minimum length of one page, but no real maximum. The stories need to be long enough so that all of the students play an active role in the process of story sharing. I encourage students to try to base their stories on their characters' personalities or jobs. One student, The Mother, shared a tale of her child's near-death illness. Our Bull Rider told of a time when he was thrown and severely injured. The students must really examine the occupations, personalities, and lifestyles they have created for their characters. It is important not to offer too

many suggestions so that students will feel the pride of creative ownership.

TRAVELING

Now comes the fun part. On a previously chosen day, all of the class comes prepared to become their characters. They are expected to dress accordingly and bring props with them. They will share their stories with the class while we "travel."

I really play up the "traveling" day. I don't actually tell the class exactly what we will be doing that day, only to be prepared to become their characters and share their stories while we take a short trip. Of course there are questions. Do we need money? Only if you want souvenirs. How far are we going? Not too far. No, you won't miss the whole day of school, only this class period.

I like to put in a few extras to add to the excitement. One year, I decided that we would "travel" to Memphis, Tennessee. I even printed tickets for the trip and made copies of postcards. I created our own prologue entitled "Memphis Memoirs" in which I introduced each character, by profession, in the order they would tell their tales as we journeyed. The tales were to be our traveling entertainment.

The trip was taken by a Rock Star, a College Student, A Race Car Driver, a Bull Rider, and such others to counter Chaucer's characters. We also added to the excitement by listening to some road music before heading out. I created a tape with snippets of songs about roads or traveling—everything from "Sesame Street" to "On the Road Again." After listening to the music, we set out for our destination. We did a walking tour of the school grounds, carrying our imaginations with us. Although we actually ventured only as far as the parking lot, tennis courts, and auditorium, in our minds we were strolling alongside the Mississippi, visiting Graceland, and cruising Beale Street. I brought along pictures and stories of my own trip to Memphis to help carry us to these destinations.

Even though many of these extras also mean extra work for the teacher, adopting a theme and/or destination increases motivation and participation. Teachers may want to journey to Washington, DC, or Paris or "travel" to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. The only limits to the choice of a destination may be students' interests. We even had competitions as did Chaucer's characters. We awarded, through class vote, Best Story and Best Costume.

TYING THE PIECES TOGETHER

After all of this discussion and analysis of various jobs, I had the perfect opportunity to open my classroom to guest speakers. I took the time to set up presentations by local employers based on my students' interest. Students can also be given the chance to contact speakers. I have found my community is responsive, and some employers are even willing to allow classes to visit the workplace. These visits help prepare students for tomorrow by giving them opportunities to see the world of work up close.

RESULTS

Through these discussions, writings, and role playing, my students seemed to learn to value their own creativity and that of others. Because no real limitations were placed on the students' creativity in writing, they gained confidence in their own writing abilities. They were also able to practice verbal skills by sharing their stories with the class. Most importantly, through discussion and analysis of their own characters, students realized that our world revolves around people of all walks of life and that they are soon to become a big and necessary part of that world.

After completing all aspects of the activity, Geoffrey Chaucer's world didn't seem as far removed from the world of today because students could see some commonalities between the times. I could tell from the 100% participation in all aspects of this project—from the physical descriptions to sharing their tales while in costume—that my classes thoroughly enjoyed it. I firmly believe the students were open to becoming involved in this project because they could see a circular relationship between literature, school life, and daily life.