



The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer



About the author

Geoffrey Chaucer (1342/3–1400) was born into a well-to-do English family. Not much is known about his education but he was well read, spoke French and had some knowledge of Latin and Italian. He was the king's personal attendant and married a servant of the queen's. He fought in the Hundred Year's War against France, was captured and the king had to pay a ransom for him. He was sent on diplomatic and trade missions to France and Italy. He was controller of the Customs on wool and wine. *The Canterbury Tales*, his major work, is considered one of the greatest works in English literature.

Summary

A group of pilgrims going to see the tomb of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury meet at an inn in London and decide to take part in a game. The game consists in each pilgrim telling a story on their way to Canterbury. The one who tells the best story will be given a free meal at the same inn.

The Knight's Tale

Two knights, Arcite and Palamon, fall in love with Emily, the niece of King Theseus of Athens, while they are in prison in the city. Arcite is freed first but is banished from Athens. In disguise he returns to serve his love while Palamon escapes from prison. They meet by accident in a forest and begin to fight. Theseus arrives and stops the fight but sets up a battle to resolve the dispute. Before the battle, Arcite prays to Mars for victory and Palamon prays to Venus for Emily's heart. Both wishes are granted. Arcite wins the battle but falls from his horse and dies so Palamon wins Emily's heart.

The Clerk's Tale

Griselda's husband tests her love with increasing cruelty, including the loss and apparent murder of her two children, divorce and remarriage and the employment of Griselda as servant to his new wife. Her husband finally feels pity for Griselda and tells her that everything was a test. The children are still alive, the remarriage never actually happened and then they live happily together for many years.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

What do women want? A knight must find the answer to this question to avoid being punished for breaking the law. Various answers are offered to him but the correct answer, according to this story, is that they want to be the head of their house. A knight gets this answer from an ugly old hag in return for a promise to grant her a wish. When she says she wants him to marry her, he has to agree. He is terribly depressed, but his new wife points out that it is better to have an ugly old wife who makes him happy than a beautiful wife who makes him sad. He agrees and she instantly becomes a beautiful young woman.

The Pardoner's Tale

Three drunken men set out to find Death and kill him. During the search, they find bags of gold. They decide to keep the treasure but then plot among themselves to kill each other to get more of the gold for themselves. In this way, they all find Death!

The Franklin's Tale

Dorigen is wooed by Aurelius while her husband, Arveragus, is away at war. She does not love Aurelius but says she will be his if he can make the rocks in the sea disappear. A magician makes the sea cover the rocks. Dorigen's husband returns from the wars and makes her keep her promise. But Aurelius is moved by her sadness and releases her from the promise. The magician, in turn, decides not to take Aurelius's money for his services.

The Friar's Tale

A summoner on the way to get money from an old woman pretends to be a bailiff when he meets a devil. They see a man cursing his horses saying 'The devil take you!' but the devil refuses to take the horses because he realises that the man doesn't mean it. However, when the old woman curses the summoner, the devil sees that she is sincere and takes the summoner to hell.



The Canterbury Tales

The Nun's Priest's Tale

A fox captures a cock by tricking him into lowering his guard when the fox praises the cock's voice and persuades him to sing. The cock then tricks the fox into opening his mouth and is able to escape. The fox tries the same trick again but once bitten, twice shy.

Background and themes

The Canterbury Tales is more than a collection of stories, it is a picture of life in England in the fourteenth century. Many of the stories were taken from popular folk tales or existing stories in other languages. The use of a pilgrimage as a framing device enabled Chaucer to bring together people from different classes and trades.

- **Knights, chivalry and honour:** *What is a knight? What does he do? Who does a knight fight for? Is it right or wrong to break a promise?*
- **Gender roles:** *Why do men fight and give orders? Why are women quiet, patient and obedient?*
- **Courtly love:** *What can people do for love? Why do people in love suffer?*
- **Corruption:** *Who are the people that do wrong? What is Chaucer's purpose when he shows us these people?*
- **Allegory and fable:** *Why do we see death and the devil as people? Why do animals appear in a story? What is Chaucer's purpose?*

Discussion activities

The Prologue

- 1 **Research:** Ask students to bring a map of the UK to place London and Canterbury.
- 2 **Guess:** The three main social groups at the time were the *nobility*, the *clergy* and the *common people*. Explain to students what each group means and have them complete a table with the pilgrims on page 8.

The Nobility	The Clergy	The Common People

- 3 **Discuss: Talk about pilgrimages**
Where do pilgrims travel to in your country? Why is the place where pilgrims go to important?

The Knight's Tale

Before reading

- 4 **Guess:** *Why does the knight tell his story first?*

While reading

- 5 **Role play:** Have students role play the argument between Arcite and Palamon over Emily's love.
- 6 **Write: A newspaper article**
Divide the class into two and have students write either of these two newspaper articles: STRANGE MAN BECOMES DUKE THESEUS AND LADY EMILY'S FAVOURITE or PALAMON BREAKS FREE FROM PRISON
- 7 **Predict:** Get students to discuss the following: *How will Mars help Arcite win Emily? How will Venus help Palamon win Emily?*

After reading

- 8 **Write: A Valentine's card**
Students are either Arcite or Palamon and they are in prison. Have them write a Valentine's card to Emily telling her that they love her.
- 9 **Write: Arcite's obituary**
Explain to students what an *obituary* is. Have them write Arcite's obituary as if they were Palamon.

The Clerk's Tale

Before reading

- 10 **Guess:** At the end of the Knight's tale, there is a short description of the clerk. Ask students: *Why is the clerk so poor? Why is the clerk so happy?*

While reading

- 11 **Write: An ad**
Have students imagine that they are the lord's people. Have them write an ad in the local newspaper to find him a wife.
- 12 **Discuss: Marriage for love**
Walter marries for love and not for money. What is more important in life: love, money or both?
- 13 **Discuss: Love and age**
Griselda says that *'As men grow old, love grows cold.'* Do you agree with her or not?
- 14 **Guess:** *What is the lesson of this story?*

After reading

- 15 **Write: Griselda's diary**
Divide students into three groups and have them write Griselda's diary about what she is really thinking when (a) her husband kills her two children, (b) he tells her that he is going to remarry and (c) asks Griselda to be his new wife's servant. Once they have finished, ask them to read their entries aloud.

The Wife of Bath

Before reading

- 16 **Discuss: Women vs. men**
Get students to discuss the following:
Who know better what they want: women or men?



The Canterbury Tales

While reading

- 17 **Research:** Have students make a classroom survey of what women want in life.
- 18 **Predict:** Get students to discuss this: *What will the old woman ask the knight to do?*
- 19 **Discuss: The tale's lesson**
Get students to discuss the following: *What is the lesson of this story? Is this story the opposite of the Clerk's tale? Do you know another story where someone changes from being ugly to being beautiful?*

After reading

- 20 **Write: A newspaper article**
Have students write about the knight and the old woman's wedding day.
- 21 **Artwork:** Have students draw the knight and the old woman's wedding photo album.
- 22 **Guess:** Have students imagine what would happen if the old woman turned ugly again. Would the knight be happy?

The Pardoner's Tale

Before reading

- 23 **Research:** Have students look up information about pardons.

While reading

- 24 **Discuss: Death**
Have students discuss the following:
Why does the word 'Death' start with a big letter? When does Death kill thousands of people?
- 25 **Write:** Divide the class into two. Have one part of the class write the thoughts of the thieves that hide in the wood and the other write the thoughts of the thief that goes back to the town.
- 26 **Discuss: The narrator**
Have students discuss the following:
Why does the pardoner choose to tell this story?

After reading

- 27 **Write: A letter**
Have students write a letter from the old man to the readers explaining his actions in the story.
- 28 **Role play:** After the tale the pardoner wants to sell pardons. Have one student be the pardoner and the rest the pilgrims. What will the pilgrims say to the pardoner?

The Franklin's Tale

Before reading

- 29 **Discuss: Promises**
Have students discuss the following:
Are promises important? What kind of promise would you break?

While reading

- 30 **Guess:** *Why did Dorigen promise to love Aurelius if he took away all the rocks from the sea?*
- 31 **Role play:** Have students play Dorigen and her neighbours. They must persuade Dorigen to go out.
- 32 **Check:** Have students discuss the following:
How often in the story do people feel ill because of love? Have you ever felt like that?

After reading

- 33 **Guess:** Have students imagine what happened to Aurelius.

The Friar's Tale

Before reading

- 34 **Predict:** *The friar and the summoner hate each other. What is the friar's story going to be about?*

While reading

- 35 **Discuss:** Have students discuss the following:
To you, is the colour red the colour of (a) love, (b) hate or (c) the devil?

After reading

- 36 **Write: The summoner's story**
Have students tell the summoner's story about a friar.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

Before reading

- 37 **Check:** Explain to the students what a *fable* is and have them look for seven fables they know.

While reading

- 38 **Discuss: Bad dreams**
How often do you have bad dreams? Do you believe they mean anything? Do you know any story about a bad dream that came true?
- 39 **Check:** Fables show the good and bad sides of people. *After reading the story, what is Chaunticleer's, Pertelote's and the fox's bad side?*

After reading

- 40 **Role play:** *What do Chaunticleer and Pertelote say to each other after the fox's attack?* Get students to plan the dialogue and act it out.
- 41 **Role play:** *What does the nun say to the priest after the tale?* Get students to hold the conversation.

Extra activities

- 42 **Artwork**
Explain to the students what stained glass is. Have students create designs of the tales for stained glass windows.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.