

The Canterbury Tales - The Prologue - Group Work

1. Why do you think that the story begins in the spring? Can you see a literal, practical reason for the beginning of such a pilgrimage? Now, how about a metaphorical reason(s)?
2. Read carefully the portraits of Knight, Parson and Plowman. Of which “estates” are these idealized portraits? Other portraits represent two new classes that were gaining prominence in the fourteenth century: the urban middle class, and the intellectuals (people trained as “clerks,” i.e. “clerics” -- but not destined to a career within the church). Which pilgrims represent these new classes?
3. As you read the various portraits, pick out a key word or phrase to describe each pilgrim. Pay attention to physical descriptions (in medieval times, physiognomy was believed to be revealing of character -- see chart on the four humors). What do the descriptions reveal about the pilgrims' characters? Which figures are painted in a positive or in a negative light?
4. Why does the tale begin with the knight? How might this give us a false impression of what the other characters are going to be like?
5. The description of the nun is filled with irony. Name some of the “un-nun” like things that she does or has. Later in the book, she tells her tale that is filled with gory details of killing Jewish residents of a town. She describes it in cold, unsympathetic terms. Use the specifics of her description in the prologue and document how is ironic.
6. The Wife of Bath is often described as the first feminist character in English literature. Name 3 specific facts from the prologue that might lead you to this conclusion. Remember this when you read her prologue.
7. Who is the only clergy member portrayed in an entirely flattering light? Who are the other clergy members mentioned here? Contrast this positive character by writing down one of his/her positive attributes and contrast it with a corresponding negative attribute from one of the other clergy (be sure to note which clergy person you are talking about).
8. If the travelers to Canterbury are all pilgrims, are **they all pilgrims seeking the same thing**? In other words, are they all going to pray at the shrine of Thomas à Becket? Speculate on why your group thinks they are going to Canterbury (your reasons can be as short as *piety* or *greed*). As you answer this, think about what you've learned about Thomas Becket and his appeal to the common people, but also consider what you've just read about some of the pilgrims and their lifestyle.
9. What is the role of Chaucer the pilgrim within this group? Is he an objective observer? How does Chaucer define telling the “truth” in his poem? (The tales of the pilgrims are understood as fiction; what then is “true” about them?) What is the responsibility of the poet with respect to that truth? The Host says that the “best” tale is that which contains “best sentence and most solas” -- which best instructs and most delights us.
10. How does what Chaucer does here – undermine (deconstruct) the traditional view of history? Do you think that Chaucer is changing and molding what happened around him as much as he is trying to accurately portray what is going on around him? Make sure your group understands the question and find 2 quotes to support your answer.
11. Chaucer got in a lot of trouble for his frank and honest portrayal of his pilgrims – in fact, on his deathbed – he retracted all of his negative and offensive writings (especially this book). What kind of story do you think that we want to hear?
12. Are we, you, in any way pilgrims (think figuratively, if literally does not work)? Discuss this, toss it around, and put down what each group member thinks.

