

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.

The Canterbury Tales

Photocopiable

Before reading

1 **Guess. Match the story-tellers with what their tales are going to be about.**

Narrators	About
The Knight	Love
The Clerk	Old Age
The Wife of Bath	Death
The Pardoner	Wrong doing
The Franklin	Women
The Friar	Religion
The Nun's Priest	Adventure
	Animals
	Knights
	Tests

While reading

Prologue

2 **Re-read the prologue. Why does the owner of the inn want the pilgrims to tell stories?**

- a Because he gets bored very easily.
 - b Because he is interested in listening to the different stories the different pilgrims will tell him.
 - c Because he will make a lot of money.
- What do other students think?

The Knight's Tale

3 **In Chaucer's times, people had a very different idea of love. Match and find the rules of love.**

- a When a man falls in love, he goes
 - b A man may fall in love
 - c A man in love may prefer
 - d A man without his lady may fall
 - e A man in love is
 - f A man in love may become
 - g A man in love may fight
- 1) without knowing the person he loves.
 - 2) being in prison close to his lady than to being free away from her.
 - 3) ill and die.
 - 4) not afraid of death.
 - 5) a lady's servant to be near her.
 - 6) his best friend for a lady.
 - 7) pale and cries out.

4 **Arcite and Palamon have to look for men to fight for them. Complete the text.**

Do you want to become an important k.....? Help Arcite and Palamon win the l..... of their lives. Each needs to find a h..... men that will be ready to f..... for them. The w..... will marry L... E..... .

5 **Duke Theseus invites you to watch the fight. Put the invitation in order.**

*and beautiful ladies too! Sit next
and knights
Come to Athens
fight! There will be lords
Hippolyta and Emily and
to Duke Theseus, Queen
to see the great
watch it all!*

The Clerk's Tale

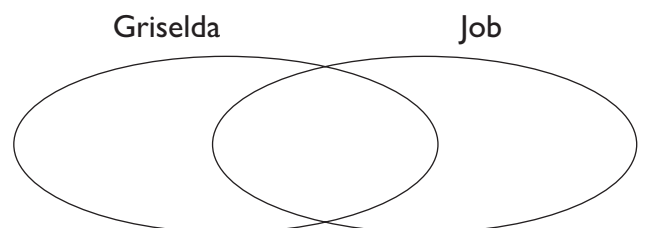
6 **These are Walter's rules for a good wife. Put the words in each line in order.**

A GOOD WIFE MUST

- a what do her husband always tells to her do.
- b give her her away when children her asks to husband.
- c go husband if back her wants marry a to new home wife.
- d for new husband's work her wife.

7 **Read the text below. In what way are these two stories similar?**

In the Bible, God puts Job to the test. First Job loses his money, then his animals, next his workmen and in the end his children. But Job is patient and continues loving God though he has lost everything.



The Canterbury Tales

Photocopiable

- 8 Write the story 'Griselda is not patient.' What does she do (a) when her husband kills her two children, (b) when he tells her that he is going to remarry and (c) when he asks Griselda to be his new wife's servant?

The Wife of Bath's Tale

- 9 Complete the answers that the knight was given (by different people).
- Women like ... more than anything.
 - They want to be ...
 - Fine ... That's what they want.
 - They are happy when they are ... good food.
 - They like having a new ... in the family.
 - They like seeing their ... come home at night.
 - They want to be the ... of their house.
 - They want their husbands to do ... they say.
- 10 Put these sentences in order to write the conversation at the end of the story.
- Knight: Do better? You can't become a young woman and you can't make yourself beautiful.
 - Knight: My lady, my love, and my dear wife. You're right. I'll always do what you tell me.
 - Woman: I'm not beautiful but that's only on the outside. Faces become old but hearts are always young. A person with a good heart is better than someone who does bad things.
 - Knight: Yes, my love. Of course you can.
 - Knight: You're very wise and good. You've taught me a lot about men and women, and about good and bad.
 - Woman: Is it better to have a beautiful wife who makes you unhappy? Or an old and ugly wife who is kind to you?
 - Woman: Remember the answer to the question. Can I be the head of your home?
 - Woman: What have I done wrong? Tell me and I'll try to do better. I'll make you happy.

The Pardoner's Tale

- 11 Look up the word *epitaph* in your dictionary. Complete the epitaph for the three thieves.
- Here rest three thieves. They said they were not a..... of D..... . They l..... for him in every field, wood or t..... . They wanted to k..... him but finally he f..... them!*

The Franklin's Tale

- 12 You are Arveragus. You are fighting in England. Write a postcard to Dorigen.

Dear Dorigen,

All is well ...

- 13 You are Aurelius. Write a letter to Dorigen saying that you love her.
- 14 Write why.
- Aurelius made all the black rocks disappear because ...
 - Dorigen had to go with Aurelius because ...
 - Dorigen's eyes were red with tears because ...
 - Aurelius let Dorigen return with Arveragus because ...
 - The magician didn't take Aurelius's money because ...

The Friar's Tale

- 15 Who said this? To whom?
- 'I've got a farm which I look after for a lord.'
 - 'I like having a lot of money, but my lord doesn't pay me much.'
 - 'You look like a man.'
 - 'The devil can take you, you lazy animals.'
 - 'You can't believe everything you hear.'
 - 'I hope the blackest devil in hell carries you away.'
 - 'Do you really mean what you are saying, madam?'
 - 'You can learn about devils there and about how we do our work.'

The Nun's Priest's Tale

- 16 Complete the following sentences with the words below.
- lady devil lord castle garden cock hen
Chauncleer, the (a), is like a
(b) who loves his wife, Pertelote.
Pertelote, the (c), is like a (d)
Chauncleer and Pertelote live in a poor
woman's (e) which is their (f)
The fox is like the (g)
- 17 Imagine you are Pertelote. Tell a tale to Chauncleer to show that dreams mean nothing.
- 18 You are the fox and you are in prison now. Write your side of the story.

Extra activities

- 19 Check your answers in activity 1. Were you right?

The Canterbury Tales

Photocopiable

The Knight's Tale

1 Who said this? To whom?

- a 'Creon has begun a war against you.'
- b 'Your face has gone white! Why did you cry out?'
- c 'Go back to Athens.'
- d 'We'll always be your friends.'
- e 'You'll never forget your dear friend but you can still be happy.'

The Clerk's Tale

2 Who said each of these things?

- a 'I want you all to talk to her like a princess'.
- b 'I'll stand with the other girls and watch Sir Walter with his beautiful lady'.
- c 'Now you've got a child and it's even worse for them'.
- d 'I'm not good enough for you'.
- e 'Now I know that you'll always be true to me'.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

3 Complete the words

- a The knight broke the l...w that all the knights l.....ed by.
- b The knight has a year and a h...l... to find the a...sw...r.
- c In the trees he saw twenty-four b.....ut...f...l young l.....i...s that were laughing, d.....c...ng and s.....g.....g in the grass.
- d All the w...m..... want to be the ...ea... of the house.
- e At the end of the w...dd.....g day, the knight s.....l... carried away his n..... wife.
- f In front of him stood the most beautiful girl in the w.....l... His wife was a f.....r...!

The Pardoner's Tale

4 Match a-h and 1-8 to get sentences from the story.

- a Let's hold up our hands and promise to
- b I live like this because
- c Oh, Mother Earth, I want to lie down in you and
- d I hope God will help you to
- e This money will bring us happiness for the rest of our lives but
- f When he comes back,
- g I'll hide their bodies first and
- h He's bringing us our supper but
 - 1) become better men.
 - 2) Death hasn't taken me.

- 3) be brothers.
- 4) he'll never have another meal again.
- 5) sleep forever.
- 6) then I'll hide the money.
- 7) we must hide it.
- 8) we'll play a game with him.

The Franklin's Tale

5 Complete the sentences.

- a Arveragus was a man of and wanted to in England.
- b Dorigen couldn't or when Arveragus was away.
- c Dorigen felt very when she saw the rocks in the sea.
- d The magician showed Aurelius and his strange things – forests full of animals, rivers, and with him.

The Friar's Tale

6 These sentences from the first part of the story are wrong. Correct them.

- a The summoner was also a bailiff.
- b The man on the brown horse had a farm which he looked after.
- c They met a man who wanted the devil to take his horses.
- d The summoner went to the house of a bad woman.
- e The woman gave him twelve pennies.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

7 What happened first? Put the story in order.

- a Chanticleer and Pertelote flew down from the roof into the garden.
- b Chanticleer flew up into a high tree.
- c The hens and Pertelote tried to stop the fox but they couldn't.
- d Chanticleer sang for the fox.
- e Chanticleer saw the fox.
- f Chanticleer talked to the fox and told him to speak to the people.
- g Chanticleer told his wife about a man who died in a farmhouse.
- h Chanticleer told Pertelote about his bad dream.
- i The fox asked Chanticleer to come down but Chanticleer said no.
- j The fox caught Chanticleer and ran with him towards the wood.
- k The fox told Chanticleer that he was the cock's friend.

The Canterbury Tales

Book key

- 1 a rich b France c Latin d business e poems
f 1400
- 2 a Open answers
b bailiff, duke, lord, pilgrim, saint, servant
c inn, temple, tower
- 3 a pilgrims b inn c story d knight e thank
- 4–5 Open answers
- 6 a 6 b 3 c 8 d 9 e 4 f 2 g 10 h 7
i 1 j 5
- 7 a They are friends when they fight for their country.
They are enemies when they want to marry Emily.
b Palamon goes to the Temple of Venus. Arcite goes
to the Temple of Mars. Arcite wins the fight, but
falls from his horse and dies after it. Palamon loses
the fight but wins Emily.
- 8–9 Open answers
- 10 a X b ✓ c ✓ d X e ✓ f ✓ g X h ✓
- 11 Open answers
- 12 The wife of Bath is a happy, rich woman with a red
face. She rides a very fat horse. She has married five
times and loves to talk.
- 13 Open answers
- 14 a queen b different c ugly old woman
d right e has to f young and beautiful
- 15 Women want a young, loving, rich husband. They
must also do what they are told. + Open answers
- 16–17 Open answers
- 18 a kill b money/gold c youngest
d kill/murder e poison f death
- 19 One is killed with a knife and two are poisoned.
- 20–21 Open answers
- 22 a Dorigen b Arveragus c Aurelius
d the magician e Arveragus f Aurelius
- 23 a Dorigen makes this promise to Arveragus. She
breaks this promise when she promises to love
Aurelius.
b Dorigen makes this promise to Aurelius. She is
going to keep her promise after listening to her
husband. But Aurelius feels sorry for her, so she
doesn't have to keep it.
c Aurelius makes this promise to the magician. He
tries to keep it but he hasn't got the money. He
says that he will pay the magician over two or three
years.

- 24–26 Open answers
- 27 a man > woman b black > red
c quickly > slowly d devil > summoner
e money > cooking pot f woman > summoner
- 28 a The owner of the horses says these words to his
horses when they are tired and slow. The devil
knows that the man doesn't mean these words. A
few minutes later the man calls the horses good. It
is important in the story that someone really means
the bad words.
b The summoner says these words to the old
woman. He wants twelve pennies from the
woman, but she hasn't got them. So he says that he
will take her cooking pot. The summoner is a very
bad man. The woman hopes that the devil will take
the summoner away. She really means it.
c The devil says these words to the summoner. The
old woman meant what she said. So tonight the
summoner will be in hell with the devil.
- 29 Possible answer: This shows that people sometimes
don't mean their hard words. Then the devil doesn't
take them.
- 30 Open answers
- 31 a frightened b brave c true d quiet
e beautiful f stupid
- 32 a He mustn't believe everything that people say to
him.
b He must keep his mouth shut when he has his
dinner in it.
- 33–42 Open answers

Discussion activities key

1 Open answers

2

The Nobility	The Clergy	The Common People
The Knight	The Pardoner	The Summoner
	The Priest	The Franklin
	The Nun	
	The Friar	

3–9 Open answers

10 The clerk must be poor because he likes spending his
life reading and studying. He may be happy because he
enjoys what he does.

11–23 Open answers

The Canterbury Tales

- 24** The word Death starts with a big letter because it is a personification. Death kills thousands of people when there is a plague or a war.
- 25** Open answers
- 26** The pardoner chooses to tell this story because it talks against the love of money and he wants the pilgrims to either give him money or buy some pardons from him.
- 27–29** Open answers
- 30** Because she thought he wouldn't be able to do it.
- 31** Open answers
- 32** Twice. First, Dorigen suffers when Arveragus goes to war and then, Aurelius suffers for Dorigen.
Open answers.
- 33–38** Open answers
- 39** Chaunticleer's bad side is that he believes everything people say to him. Pertelote's bad side is that she believes dreams mean nothing. The fox's bad side is the same as Chaunticleer's.
- 40–42** Open answers

Activity worksheets key

- 1–2** Open answers
- 3** a 7 b 1 c 2 d 3 e 4 f 5 g 6
- 4** knight, love, hundred, fight, winner, Lady, Emily
- 5** Come to Athens / to see the great / fight! There will be lords and / knights and beautiful ladies too! Sit next / to Duke Theseus, Queen / Hippolyta and Emily and / watch it all!
- 6** a always do what her husband tells her to do.
b give her children away when her husband asks her to.
c go back home if her husband wants to marry a new wife.
d work for her husband's new wife.
- 7** Griselda loses her husband and serves her husband's new wife. Job loses his animals and his workmen. Both lose their children and everything they love. Both are patient.
- 8** Open answers
- 9** a money b happy c clothes d cooking
e baby f husbands g head h what/as
- 10** h, a, c, e, f, b, g, d
- 11** afraid, Death, looked, town, kill, found

12–13 Open answers

14 Suggested answers:

- a Dorigen said she would love him / he was in love with Dorigen.
b she promised this to Aurelius / her husband told her to keep her promise.
c she loved her husband, Arveragus.
d he didn't want to come between a man and a woman.
e Aurelius did the right thing.
- 15** a The summoner to the devil.
b The devil to the summoner.
c The summoner to the devil.
d The man to his horses.
e The devil to the summoner.
f The woman to the summoner.
g The devil to the woman.
h The devil to the summoner.

- 16** a cock b lord c hen d lady e garden
f castle g devil

17–19 Open answers

Progress test key

- 1** a A soldier to Duke Theseus
b Arcite to Palamon
c God Mercury to Arcite
d Arcite and Palamon to Duke Theseus
e Duke Theseus to Palamon
- 2** a Walter b Griselda c Walter d Griselda
e Walter
- 3** a law, lived
b half, answer
c beautiful, ladies, dancing, singing
d women, head
e wedding, sadly, new
f world, fairy
- 4** a 3 b 2 c 5 d 1 e 7 f 8 g 6 h 4
- 5** a war, fight b sleep, eat c frightened, black
d brother, Dorigen
- 6** a He said he was a bailiff but he was lying.
b He said that at first but he was really a devil.
c He said but he didn't mean it.
d He said she was bad but it probably wasn't true.
e The summoner asked for twelve pennies but she didn't have that much.
- 7** a 3 b 10 c 8 d 6 e 4 f 9 g 2 h 1
i 11 j 7 k 5