

**MEDIEVAL ENGLAND  
(410-1485): CHAUCER:  
THE CANTERBURY TALES**



# MEDIEVAL ENGLAND (410-1485): CHAUCER: THE CANTERBURY TALES

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, how the story uses its characters to delicately challenge different segments of English society in the 14th century, and how and why Chaucer's opus has continued to maintain its relevance in the 600+ years since the poet died.

## Subjects

English / Language Arts  
European History  
World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

180 minutes (multiple classes)

## Tour Links

- Westminster Abbey, Poet's Corner
- Canterbury Cathedral

## Essential Questions

- Who was Geoffrey Chaucer? Why is he called the "father of English literature"?
- What are the Canterbury Tales? Why are they considered so important to the study of Medieval Britain?
- What is the story behind the pilgrimage that takes place in the story? Why are the pilgrims traveling to Canterbury?
- How do the Canterbury Tales offer diverse views on religion and social classes in Medieval Britain?

## Academic Summary

**Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 14th c.  
(Modern translation by Gerard NeCastro, University of Maine Machias, 2007)**

"Gentle people," said he, "please listen now, but take it not, I pray you, disdainfully. To speak briefly and plainly, this is the point, that each of you for pastime shall tell two tales in this journey to Canterbury, and two others on the way home, of things that have happened in the past. And whichever of you bears himself best, that is to say, that tells now tales most instructive and delighting, shall have a supper at the expense of us all, sitting here in this place, beside this post, when we come back from Canterbury. And to add to your sport I will gladly go with you at my own cost, and be your guide. And whoever opposes my judgment shall pay all that we spend on the way. If you agree that this will be so, tell me now, without more words, and without delay I will plan for that."

We agreed to this thing and pledged our word with glad hearts, and prayed him to do so, and to be our ruler and to remember and judge our tales, and to appoint a supper at a certain price. We would be ruled at his will in great and small, and thus with one voice we agreed to his judgment. At this the wine was fetched, and we drank and then each went to rest without a longer stay.

In the morning, when the day began to spring, our host arose and played rooster to us all, and gathered us in a flock. Forth we rode, a little faster than a walk, to St. Thomas-a-Watering. There our Host drew up his horse and said, "Listen, gentle people, if you will. You know your agreement; I remind you of it. If what you said at the hour of evensong last night is still what you agree to this morning at the time of matins, let us see who shall tell the first tale. So may I ever drink beer or wine, whoever rebels against my judgment shall pay all that is spent on the journey. Now draw cuts, before we depart further; he who has the shortest shall begin the tales. Sir Knight, my master and my lord," said he, "now draw your lot, for this is my will, Come nearer, my lady Prioress, and you, sir Clerk, be not shy, study not; set your hands to them, every one of you."

Without delay every one began to draw, and in short, whether it were by chance or not, the truth is, the lot fell to the Knight, at which everyone was merry and glad. He was to tell his tale, as was reasonable, according to the agreement that you have heard. What need is there for more words?

When this good man saw it was so, as one discreet and obedient to his free promise he said, "Since I begin the game, what, in God's name, welcome be the cut! Now let us ride on, and listen to what I say." And at that word we rode forth on our journey. And he soon began his tale with a cheerful spirit, and spoke in this way.

Here ends the Prologue of this book.

The study of English literature in schools today often focuses on William Shakespeare, and rightly so. The 16th/17th century "Bard of Avon" was arguably the greatest literary figure England ever produced. His poems, plays and stories are read and performed around the globe, and his works have influenced countless modern writers and playwrights since his death almost 500 years ago. Ben Jonson, one of Shakespeare's contemporaries and rivals, once remarked of Shakespeare that the man was "not of an age, but for all time."

But what about those who influenced Shakespeare? Perhaps the greatest and most well-known pre-Shakespearean English writer was Geoffrey Chaucer, a poet, royal clerk, Member of Parliament and writer in the late medieval age of 14th century England.

Chaucer, a well-respected literary figure in his own time and since, wrote mostly in poems. Perhaps his greatest literary contribution was that he wrote in Middle English at a time when many of his contemporaries still wrote in French or Latin, languages of the elite. Although his original audience would have been aristocratic elite members of English society, many of Chaucer's works were written so that commoners could read and understand them. They were especially popular with people associated with the "Lollard" movement of the late 14th century. An early precursor to the Protestant movements of the 16th century, many Lollards saw Chaucer's satirical writings about priests, friars and other church officials as being akin to their own beliefs.

Chaucer's greatest work was a tale of pilgrims on the way to see Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury Cathedral. Known as the Canterbury Tales, the poem details a story-telling contest by the pilgrims as they travel. Each of the characters represents a segment of English society in the 14th century, from various members and orders of the Church to different social classes. There is even a discussion within the poem on gender roles in society. Perhaps that is why the Canterbury Tales have been so popular over the centuries, often being read today to the distress of many students who struggle with Chaucer's use of language and structure. Nonetheless, the themes and stories are timeless.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, how the story uses its characters to delicately challenge different segments of English society in the 14th century, and how and why Chaucer's opus has continued to maintain its relevance in the 600+ years since the poet died.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the basics of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales,
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how Chaucer uses each of his major characters to delicately criticize different parts of English society in the 14th century.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why Chaucer's Canterbury Tales has continued to maintain its relevance over the last 600+ years.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How do writers sometimes use characters to criticize different aspects of society? Can you think of modern examples of writers and/or film makers using this literary device? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Canterbury Tales. (20 min)
- Videos – Chaucer's England and The Canterbury Tales: History Teachers (30 min for both)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Geoffrey Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Advanced/AP/IB students should read the Canterbury Tales full text outside of class over the course of about a week, taking notes for use in class.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Discuss Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, how the story uses its characters to delicately challenge different segments of English society in the 14th century, and how and why Chaucer's opus has continued to maintain its relevance in the 600+ years since the poet died. (30 min)

## III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, how the story uses its characters to delicately challenge different segments of English society in the 14th century, and how and why Chaucer's opus has continued to maintain its relevance in the 600+ years since the poet died.

## Extension

### On tour: Canterbury Cathedral (Becket's memorial)

While on tour in Great Britain, students will visit Canterbury Cathedral, home to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the home cathedral to the Anglican Church, where they can see for themselves where Archbishop Becket was murdered and where a later shrine to Becket was built. The shrine became a popular destination for pilgrims (as detailed in The Canterbury Tales), and the monks at Canterbury profited greatly from the veneration of their former Archbishop. During the "Dissolution of the Monasteries" in 1538 under King Henry VIII, the saint's bones were dug up and destroyed, and a shrine that had been dedicated to him was also destroyed under the auspice of purging Christianity of its false relics (the gold ended up in Henry's coffers). Today, there is a modern memorial where the shrine once stood.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/](http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/)  
Geoffrey Chaucer (website) – from Harvard University’s English E-115b class (Chaucer: the Canterbury Tales). Contains primary and secondary sources, along with links to pages explaining many aspects of 14th century English life.
- [sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/CTlist.html](http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/CTlist.html)  
The Canterbury Tales (primary source) – modern English version of Chaucer’s greatest literary work from Harvard University
- [www.yale.edu/engl125/text-only/lectures/lecture-1.html](http://www.yale.edu/engl125/text-only/lectures/lecture-1.html)  
Chaucer (website) – from Professor Lee Paterson of Yale University
- [www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/chaucer\\_geoffrey.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/chaucer_geoffrey.shtml)  
Geoffrey Chaucer (website) – from the BBC
- [hosting.uaa.alaska.edu/afdtk/pedagogy.htm](http://hosting.uaa.alaska.edu/afdtk/pedagogy.htm)  
The Chaucer Pedagogy Page: Online Assistance for Teachers and Students of Chaucer and the Later Middle Ages (website). From the University of Alaska. Outstanding place to start for teachers and students.
- [machias.edu/faculty/necastro/chaucer/index.html](http://machias.edu/faculty/necastro/chaucer/index.html)  
eChaucer: Chaucer in the 21st Century (website) – from Gerard NeCastro, Professor of English at the University of Maine at Machias
- [www.ahsd.org/english/bathe/CantTales/CantTalesIntro.pptx](http://www.ahsd.org/english/bathe/CantTales/CantTalesIntro.pptx)  
Canterbury Tales (PowerPoint) – from Abington Heights High School (PA)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBa5nN\\_JyPk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBa5nN_JyPk)  
The Canterbury Tales: “California Dreaming” by the Mamas and the Papas (video). Outstanding video by a group calling themselves the “History Teachers” in which they tell the basics of the Canterbury Tales in a 3-minute music video that brings Chaucer’s Middle English tome to students in a way they will remember and understand. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9TXiUBOXAw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9TXiUBOXAw)  
Chaucer’s England (video)

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey\\_Chaucer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Chaucer)  
Geoffrey Chaucer – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Canterbury\\_Tales](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Canterbury_Tales)  
The Canterbury Tales – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Becket](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Becket)  
Thomas Becket – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/country\\_profile](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile)  
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/canterbury\\_cathedral](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/canterbury_cathedral)  
On the Road: Canterbury Cathedral – from Passports Educational Travel

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-henry-ii-and-thomas-becket](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-henry-ii-and-thomas-becket)

Medieval England – Henry II and Becket: Struggle between the Church and the Crown

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215)  
Medieval England – Magna Carta of 1215
- [www.passports.com/lesson-plans/england/norman-invasion-of-1066](http://www.passports.com/lesson-plans/england/norman-invasion-of-1066)  
Medieval England – Norman Invasion of 1066
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-richard-the-lionheart](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-richard-the-lionheart)  
Medieval England – Richard the Lionheart
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-robin-hood](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-robin-hood)  
Medieval England – Robin Hood
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy)  
Medieval France – Avignon Papacy 1309-1378
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge)  
Medieval / Renaissance Venice – The Doge
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348)  
Medieval Europe – Bubonic Plague: Europe's Black Death
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-inferno](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-inferno)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Inferno
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-paradiso](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-paradiso)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Paradiso
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Purgatorio
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco)  
Medieval Venice – Basilica di San Marco
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-travels](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-travels)  
Medieval Venice – Marco Polo and his Travels
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade)  
Medieval Venice – The Fourth Crusade 1202-1204
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/scandinavia/vikings-western-exploration-of-the-north-atlantic](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/scandinavia/vikings-western-exploration-of-the-north-atlantic)  
Vikings and Sagas: Erik the Red and Leif Erikson
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain)  
Al-Andalus – Islamic Spain
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople-hagia-sophia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople-hagia-sophia)  
Byzantine Empire – Constantinople: Church of the Holy Wisdom
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople)  
Byzantine Empire – Constantinople: the New Rome
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453)  
Byzantine Empire – Fall of Constantinople 1453
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054)  
Great Schism of 1054 – splitting the Christian Church into East and West

## Key Terms

- Becket
- Canterbury Cathedral
- Chaucer
- Irony
- Lollard
- Middle English
- Pilgrimage
- Vernacular



