

Middle English Literature



Geoffrey Chaucer
The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury Tales

Key Facts

Author	Geoffrey Chaucer
Type of work	Poetry (two tales are in prose: the Tale of Melibee and the Parson's Tale)
genres	Narrative collection of poems; character portraits; parody; estates satire; romance; fabliau
Language	Middle English
Time and place written	Around 1386- 1395, England
Date of first publication	Early 15 th century
publisher	Originally circulated in hand-copied manuscripts

The Canterbury Tales

Key Facts (cont.)

narrator	The primary narrator is an anonymous member of the pilgrimage, who is not described
tone	an impressive range of attitudes toward life and literature. The tales are by turns turn satirical, elevated, earthly and comical.
Setting	the late 14 th century, the Tabard Inn, the road to Canterbury
protagonists	Each individual tale has a protagonist; none of the story tellers is superior to others; it is an equal company.
Major conflict	The struggles between characters, manifested in the links between tales, mostly involve clashes between social classes, differing tastes, competing professions. There are also clashes between the sexes, and there is resistant to the

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Themes

The Pervasive-ness of Courtly Love

“courtly love” – a set of ideas about love that was enormously influential on the literature and culture of the Middle Ages. Poets through Europe promoted the notions that true love only exists outside of marriage; that true love may be idealized and spiritual, and may exist without ever being physically consummated; and that a man becomes the servant of the lady he loves. Love is a torment or a disease: when a man is in love he cannot sleep or eat, and therefore he undergoes physical changes, sometimes to the point of becoming unrecognizable.

The importance of Company

Company literally signifies the entire group of people – a group of people with whom one eats, or breaks bread. Also, company is a group of people engaged in a particular business, as it is used today. The functioning and well-being of medieval communities depended upon the group of socially bonded workers in towns and guilds, known informally as companies. Eating together was a way for guild members to cement friendship, creating a support structure for their working community

The Canterbury Tales

Themes

The Corruption of the Church

By the late 14th ct. the Catholic Church had become extremely wealthy. In a century of plague, famine and scarce labour, the sight of a church ornamented with gold seemed unfair to people, and the Church's preaching against greed seemed hypocritical. Stories about greedy, irreligious churchmen who accepted bribes, indulged themselves sensually and gastronomically, while ignoring the poor peasants begging at their doors.

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Symbols

Spring-time	Rebirth and fresh beginnings, thus appropriate for the beginning of pilgrimage. It also evokes erotic love. Devotion to courtly love is compared to the freshness of the month of May
Clothing	The description of garments helps to define each character. The clothes symbolize what lies beneath the surface of each personality.
Physiognomy	It was a science that judged a person's temperament and character based on his or her anatomy. The most exaggerated facial features are those of the peasants.

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Motifs

motif	Recurring structure, contrast and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes
romance	<p>The genre included tales of knights rescuing maidens, embarking of guests, and forming bonds with other knights and rulers (kings and queens). In the Canterbury tales, the knight's tale incorporates romantic elements in an ancient classical setting. The Wife of Bath's Tale is framed by Arthurian Romance, with an unnamed knight of the round table as its unlikely hero, but the tale itself becomes a proto-feminist's moral instruction for domestic behaviour. The Miller's tale ridicules the traditional elements of romance by transforming the love between a young wooer and a willing maiden into a boisterous and violent romp</p>
fabliaux	<p>Comical and often grotesque stories in which the characters most often succeed by means of their sharp wits. A grotesque image is wittily expanded in an unconventional way. In the case of the Summoner's tale it excels in discussing the division of the fart in a highly intellectual and hilarious manner.</p>