**The Canterbury Tales**

**full title**  ·  *The Canterbury Tales*

**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**  · Sometime in the early fifteenth century

**publisher**  · Originally circulated in hand-copied manuscripts

**narrator**  · The primary narrator is an anonymous, naïve member of the pilgrimage, who is not described. The other pilgrims narrate most of the tales.

**point of view**  · In the General Prologue, the narrator speaks in the first person, describing each of the pilgrims as they appeared to him. Though narrated by different pilgrims, each of the tales is told from an omniscient third-person point of view, providing the reader with the thoughts as well as actions of the characters.

**tone**  ·  *The Canterbury Tales* incorporates an impressive range of attitudes toward life and literature. The tales are by turns satirical, elevated, pious, earthy, bawdy, and comical. The reader should not accept the naïve narrator’s point of view as Chaucer’s.

**tense**  · Past

**setting (time)**  · The late fourteenth century, after 1381

**setting (place)**  · The Tabard Inn; the road to Canterbury

**protagonists**  · Each individual tale has protagonists, but Chaucer’s plan is to make none of his storytellers superior to others; it is an equal company. In the Knight’s Tale, the protagonists are Palamon and Arcite; in the Miller’s Tale, Nicholas and Alisoun; in the Wife of Bath’s Tale, the errant knight and the loathsome hag; in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, the rooster Chanticleer.

**major conflict**  · The struggles between characters, manifested in the links between tales, mostly involve clashes between social classes, differing tastes, and competing professions. There are also clashes between the sexes, and there is resistance to the Host’s somewhat tyrannical leadership.

**rising action**  · As he sets off on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, the narrator encounters a group of other pilgrims and joins them. That night, the Host of the tavern where the pilgrims are staying presents them with a storytelling challenge and appoints himself judge of the competition and leader of the company.

**climax** · Not applicable (collection of tales)

**falling action**  · After twenty-three tales have been told, the Parson delivers a long sermon. Chaucer then makes a retraction, asking to be forgiven for his sins, including having written *The Canterbury Tales.*

**themes**  · The pervasiveness of courtly love, the importance of company, the corruption of the church

**motifs**  · Romance, fabliaux

**symbols**  · Springtime, clothing, physiognomy

**foreshadowing**  · Not applicable (collection of tales

Canterbury Tales Terminology

**Fabliau**

.......Five of the tales that the pilgrims tell are fabliaux. The fabliau was a short verse tale with coarse humor and earthy, realistic, and sometimes obscene descriptions that present an episode in the life of contemporary middle- and lower-class people. The fabliau uses satire and cynicism, along with vulgar comedy, to mock one or several of its characters. Not infrequently, the ridiculed character is a jealous husband, a wayward wife, a braggart, a lover, a proud or greedy tradesman, a doltish peasant, or a lustful or greedy clergyman.  Plot development often depends on a prank, a pun, a mistaken identity, or an incident involving the characters in intrigue. The fabliau was popular in France from 1100 to 1300, then went out of fashion. Chaucer revived the format in *The Canterbury Tales* to write “The Miller’s Tale,” “The Reeve’s Tale,” “The Cook’s Tale,” “The Shipman’s Tale,” and The Summoner’s Tale.” It is not entirely clear whether the fabliau was a pastime of the upper classes as a means to ridicule their social inferiors or of the middle and lower classes as a means to poke fun at themselves.

**Chivalric Romance (or Courtly Love)**

"The Knight's Tale" is an example of a chivalric romance, or a tale of courtly love. In such tales, the knights exhibit nobility, courage, and respect for their ladies fair, and the ladies exhibit elegance, modesty, and fidelity. Although knights and ladies may fall passionately in love, they eschew immoral behavior. In conflicts between good and evil, justice prevails.

**Exemplum**

"The Pardoner's Tale" is an example of an exemplum (plural, *exempla*), a short narrative in verse or prose that teaches a moral lesson or reinforces a doctrine or religious belief. Other tales can be regarded as exempla or contain elements of the exemplum in that they present examples of right or wrong living that teach moral precepts.

**Arthurian Romance**

"The Wife of Bath's Tale" is an example of an Arthurian romance, a type of work in which a knight in the age of the legendary King Arthur goes on a quest.

**Beast Fable**

"The Nun's Priest's Tale" is an example of a beast fable, a short story in verse or prose in which animals are the main characters. They exhibit human qualities, and their activities underscore a universal truth.

**Satire**

A satire is a literary work or technique that attacks or pokes fun at vices and imperfections. Many of the prologues and tales contain satire that ridicules people who exhibit hypocrisy, greed, false humility, stupidity, self-importance, and other flaws.

**Burlesque**

A burlesque is a literary work or technique that mocks a person, a place, a thing, or an idea by using wit, irony, hyperbole, sarcasm, and/or understatement. For example, a burlesque may turn a supposedly respected person—such as old John in "The Miller's Tale"—into a buffoon. A hallmark of burlesque is its thoroughgoing exaggeration, often to the point of the absurd.

**Low Comedy**

A type of comedy that is generally physical rather than verbal, relying on slapstick and horseplay as in "The Miller's Tale." Low comedy usually focuses on ordinary folk.

**Breton Lay**

"The Franklin's Tale" is an example of a Breton lay, a Fourteenth Century English narrative poem in rhyme about courtly love that contains elements of the supernatural  The English borrowed the Breton-lay format from the French. A lay is a medieval narrative poem originally intended to be sung. *Breton* is an adjective describing anyone or anything from Brittany, France.

**Allegory**

An allegory is a literary work or technique that ascribes secondary or symbolic meaning to characters, events, objects, and ideas, as in "The Nun's Priest's Tale." The pilgrims' journey to Canterbury may also be regarded as an allegory in that it can be viewed as a representation of the journey through life or the journey toward the ultimate destination, heaven.