

# The Canterbury Tales: an ironic portrait of England

Target:  
Scuola Secondaria di Secondo Livello  
Triennio

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# What are *The Canterbury Tales*?

A collection of verse tales, roughly short stories and sketches of life told by a group of thirty pilgrims on the way to Canterbury.

- Original intention: 120 tales (each pilgrim tells two tales on the road from London to Canterbury and two on the way back)  
+ the General Prologue with detailed portraits of the pilgrims.
- In the end: **24 tales + the General Prologue**

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# When, where, why?

## From The General Prologue

When in April the sweet showers fall  
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all  
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power  
As brings about the engendering of the flower,  
5 When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath  
Exhales an air in every grove and heath  
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun  
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram* has run,  
And the small fowl are making melody  
10 That sleep away the night with open eye  
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)  
Then people long to go on pilgrimages  
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands  
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,  
15 And specially, from every shire's end  
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend  
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick  
To give his help to them when they were sick.

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20 It happened in that season that one day  
In Southwark, at The Tabard, as I lay  
Ready to go on pilgrimage and start  
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,  
At night there came into that hostelry  
Some nine and twenty in a company  
25 Of sundry folk happening then to fall  
In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all  
That towards Canterbury meant to ride.  
The rooms and stables of the inn were wide:  
They made us easy, all was of the best.  
30 And, briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,  
I'd spoken to them all upon the trip  
And was soon one with them in fellowship,  
Pledged to rise early and to take the way  
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.

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# Two good reasons why this medieval work is worthwhile

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# 1. The author is the Father of English Poetry



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The author is **Geoffrey Chaucer**: the so-called 'Father of English Poetry'.

Chaucer went on diplomatic and commercial missions to Italy ➡

became familiar with **Italian literature** ➡

a vernacular language could become a literary standard ➡

the **East Midlands and London dialect** became the dominant form of literary language that would later develop into Modern English.

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## 2. Chaucer's irony

It is a vivid and ironic portrait of Middle-class England in the late 14th century.

“He turned the decorative picture-frame of the Decameron into the moving portrait-gallery of the ride to Canterbury”.

(G.K. Chesterton, *Geoffrey Chaucer*)

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# “A Comedy of character”

The Prologue with the detailed portraits of the pilgrims is made of much stronger material than the tales it carries.

**From *Geoffrey Chaucer* by G.K. Chesterton:**

“It is as if he (Chaucer) had been an architect (...) For indeed *The Canterbury tales* do remain rather like a huge, hollow, unfinished Gothic cathedral with some of the niches empty and some filled with statues, and some part of the large plan traced only in lines upon the ground.

Just in such a case, the arches would stand up more strongly than the statues, or the walls be made first and more firmly than the ornament, so in Chaucer’s work the framework is finer than the stories which correspond to the statues.”

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# The portrait Chaucer makes of himself

But pretty soon the Host was back to telling his jokes, until he suddenly turned to **me** and said: [...]

“Come on now, chin up! Be happy!

Make room, everyone, for this guy here.

He and I are of about the same build:

any woman would love to hold him in her arms.

**There’s something funny about this guy,  
he only speaks when he absolutely has to. [...]**

Come on, speak up now, and tell us a story like the others have.

And make it a happy story too. Let’s hear it!”

**“You’ll have to forgive me,” I answered him.**

**“I’m pretty bad at telling stories.”**

(from The Prioress-Sir Thopas Link)

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# The portrait of the Wife of Bath

A **worthy woman** from beside **Bath** city  
was with us, somewhat deaf, which was a pity.  
In making cloth she showed so great a bent  
She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent.  
In all the parish not a dame dared stir  
Towards the altar steps in front of her.[...]  
Her kerchiefs were of finely woven ground,  
I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound.[...]  
A worthy woman all her life, what's more  
She's had five husbands, all at the church door,  
Apart from other company in youth;  
No need just now to speak of that, forsooth.[...]  
And she was skilled in wandering by the way  
She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say. [...]  
**And knew the remedies for love's mischances,**  
**An art in which she knew the oldest dances.**

(from the General Prologue)

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# The portrait of the Prioress

There also was a Nun, a **Prioress**,  
Her way of smiling very simple and coy.  
Her greatest oath was only "By St Loy!" [...]  
She certainly was very entertaining,  
**Pleasant and friendly in her ways, and straining**  
**To counterfeit a courtly kind of grace,**  
A stately bearing fitting to her place. [...]  
Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.  
She wore a coral trinket on her arm,  
A set of beads, the gaudies tricked in green,  
Whence hung a golden brooch of brightest sheen  
On which there first was graven a crowned A,  
And lower, Amor vincit omnia.

(from the General Prologue)

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# The portrait of the Pardoner

This **Pardoner** had hair as yellow as wax,  
But smooth it hung as does a strike of flax;  
In driplets hung his locks behind his head,  
Down to his shoulders which they overspread; [...]   
No beard had he, nor ever should he have,  
For smooth his face has he'd just had a shave; [...]   
Was no such pardoner of equal grace  
For in his bag he had a pillow-case  
The which, he said, was Out True Lady's veil:  
He said he had a piece of the very sail  
That good Saint Peter had, on time he sailed  
Upon the sea, till Jesus him had hailed. [...]   
**And thus, with flattery and equal japes,  
He made the parson and the rest his apes.**

(from the General Prologue)

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# What is behind Chaucer's Irony?

Chaucer does not justify the flaws of his fellow pilgrims, yet he smiles at their frailties because they do have not the last word on them.

His awareness of the infinite value of man is the source of his sympathetic and ironic look on them.

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In Chesterton's words (from *Geoffrey Chaucer* by G.K. Chesterton)

"The whole point of Chaucer is in the fact that he does not retire with lords and ladies, like Boccaccio, to tell his tales. He is enjoying not the walled garden but the world. The world he is enjoying is just as much the world of the Ploughman and the Cook as of the Prioress and the Squire.

He makes fun of people, in the exact sense of getting fun out of them for himself. He does not want the Friar and the Wife of Bath to perish; one would sometimes suspect that he does not want them to change."

"A great voice was given by God, and a great volume of singing, not to his saints who deserved it much better; not to any of those heroes who had made their clearing in the ancient forest; but only suddenly, and for a reason, to the most human of human beings."

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# Food for thought

“The whole purpose and attitude of the Pilgrimage rested on a reality recognized by all sorts of people, good, bad and indifferent. A religion of miracles turned all this crowd of incongruous people into one company.(...)”

The real modern problem is- what pilgrimage have we on which different men will ride together? I mean of course, one on which they will ride together and remain different.”

(G.K. Chesterton *Geoffrey Chaucer*)

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# The Students' picture gallery

The following slides display full-size portraits of Chaucer's pilgrims made by the students with the collage technique.

The last slide shows a poem in couplets realized by the same students which makes fun of their caretaker.

Both activities contributed to the students' in-depth understanding of Chaucer's irony. Besides, they enhanced the students' linguistic and artistic skills.

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## Chaucer



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# The Wife of Bath



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## The Prioress

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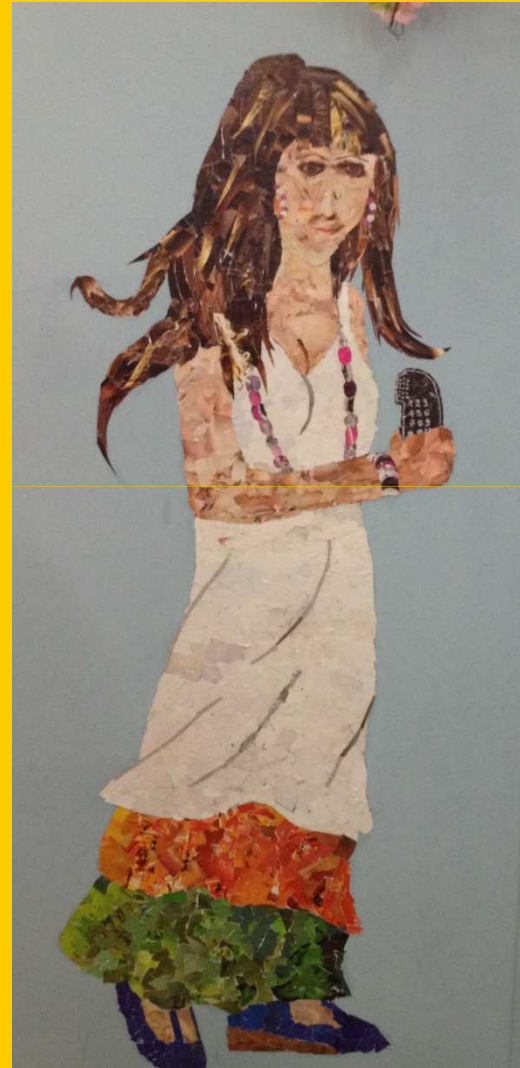
# The Pardoner



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# The Caretaker

There is also a caretaker  
As sparkling as a Christmas cracker.  
Giovanna is her name  
But nobody knows her surname.  
Everything she often forgets  
Except for her cigarettes.  
With the teachers she is always patient  
and her language is not ancient.  
Generous is her neckline  
And makes the students more benign.  
What is more, she loves fashions  
and she wears trendy extensions.  
She always asks about those absent  
Interrupting each docent.  
At the break she tittle-tattles  
And she chaperones new couples.  
To tell the truth, we love her a lot  
and without her, live we cannot.



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