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# *DC English IV*

## *World/British Literature*

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# Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-Oct.25.1400)

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*Geoffrey Chaucer is seen as a radical change for English Literature.*

His writings help establish the beginning notion of a public voice for poets in England.

- his poetry is valued both for its lyrical creativity as well as its narrative voice; using both a well-crafted phrase and exploration of human character, his full work seeks to define the diversity of human nature
- he likewise through experimentation established the expectation of poetry to be written in iambic pentameter; many of his lines have a syllable count of eleven rather than ten due to his use of trochee stresses

# Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-Oct.25.1400)

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**Without the benefit of a printing press**, like the Italian writers **Dante, Petrarch**, and **Boccaccio** before him, Chaucer managed to become an early version of a celebrity poet; **he is known as the father of English poetry.**

**Most importantly**, despite the language of the aristocratic court at the time was in Norman-French, Chaucer chose to write *The Canterbury Tales* in the vernacular of London dialect of Middle English.

This choice perhaps is due to the fact he himself was not of the noble class, but rather of the **rising merchant middle class.**

- due to his father's success as a wine merchant, Chaucer as a boy gained the position as a page for the court of King Edward III
- he was educated in Latin, French, and Italian
- as a young man, he gained positions for both diplomatic and civil service

# Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-Oct.25.1400)

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***The Canterbury Tales* is considered his master work.**

Within this **epic poem** he constructs a structural device of a **frame story** to illustrate the different individuals in English society of the Fourteenth Century in elaborate detail.

- based on the general intentions of the full collection<sup>1</sup>, this choice is strategic in generating the different narrations of his cast of characters
- the framework relates a springtime pilgrimage to the Canterbury Cathedral; in Europe such journeys were undertaken to seek miraculous cures, to seek redemption for past sins, or simply to experience a wandering trek to a religious shrine; **all class members could participate in this venture**
- with this type of structure, Chaucer was enabled to show a distinct collection of people with unique attitudes, philosophies, and ranks in the English Plantagenet culture

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According to *The Norton Anthology*, “Chaucer’s original plan for *The Canterbury Tales* projected about one hundred twenty stories two for each pilgrim to tell on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back. Chaucer actually completed only twenty-two, although two more exist in fragments” (79).

# *Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-Oct.25.1400)*

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As a result he provides a very realistic cross-section of the everyday medieval world he personally experienced.

***There are just over thirty major characters presented in the work.***

Chaucer intended to report two stories from each member of the pilgrimage as they were heading to the cathedral and then relate two stories from each member on their return journey.

- as it is, he died before fully realizing his idea— yet, what remains is a successful discussion of human nature from a vast collection of people
- three major groups are represented: feudal, ecclesiastical, and civil service
- there exists almost an equal, clear division between all three sections

# Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-Oct.25.1400)

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<u>Feudal</u>	<u>Ecclesiastical</u>	<u>Civil/Mercantile</u>	
Knight	Parson	Physician	Canon
Squire	Summoner	Man of Law	Canon's Yeoman
K.'s Yeoman	Monk	Manciple	Five Guildsmen
Franklin	Prioress (Nun)	Merchant	The Host
Reeve	Nun's Priest	Skipper	
Miller	Second Nun	Cook	
Plowman	Clerk	Wife of Bath	
	Pardoner	<i>Narrator</i>	
	Friar		

# Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-Oct.25.1400)

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*Within the work, Chaucer presents himself as the Narrator.*

Judging from the explicit ironies and obvious jokes the Chaucer himself uses, it is likely that this character is a self caricature and not an accurate self-portrait.

- his participation in the story acts **as a witness of action**
- **his states his records of the events are retold from memory**, not as they occur
- furthermore, his descriptions of the characters sometimes reveal his own personal prejudices and biases against specific institutions in society— not necessarily Geoffrey Chaucer’s own opinions; **the Narrator is a flawed character and is therefore not very reliable**