

# The canterbury tales by geoffrey chaucer

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Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" is more than just an entertaining collection of stories and characters; it is a representation of the society Chaucer lived in. In the late 14th century England the traditional feudal system was changing as the church was losing its importance and more people were becoming part of the emerging middle class. Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" is a microcosm of this society because it demonstrates the social divisions known as the Estates, it illustrates the growth of the middle class and the decline of the feudal system, and it shows the corruption and power of the Church, and it embodies most aspects of the Middle Age.

Feudal society was traditionally divided into three "estates", which were roughly equivalent to social classes. The "First Estate" was the Church, the "Second Estate" was the Nobility, and the "Third Estate" was the Peasantry. The rigid division of society into the three traditional "estates" was beginning to break down in the late 14th century England, and by the time of Chaucer, there was a rise of the middle class. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer is highly conscious of the social divisions known as the "Estates." While the genre of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole is a frame narrative, the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* is an example of "Estates Satire," a genre which criticizes the abuses that occur within the three traditional Estates.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* embodies most aspects of the Middle Ages, whether it is in the form of immoral religious clergyman, poor, virtuous farmers, or the honorable knight. All these characters provide excellent examples of the many omnipresent themes of the Middle Ages. The

prevailing values and themes of the Middle Ages included violence and revenge, religion and corruption, and social status and hierarchy.

The times in which Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is set are tumultuous and are filled with suffering, conflict, and general animosity; as such, the ideas of revenge and thus violence are fairly prevalent. In a great many of Chaucer's tales, this theme is framed perfectly. An example near the end of the Reeve's tale after the miller discovers the scholars' treachery. " He [the miller] grabbed Allan by the Adam's apple, and he, in return, roughly grabbed the miller and hit him on the nose with his fist" (Chaucer 83). In this instance, not only a quick resort to violence is exhibited, but violence is used as revenge as the miller attacks Allan after realizing that he has slept with his wife. Evidenced by this, violent tendencies were often the most common, and the most appropriate response.

In all of England, violence was seen as something of a way of life Curtis Gruenler, in a literary analysis, states, "[V]iolence on a large scale held English attention as spectacular victories against the French early in the Hundred Years War were followed by a series of costly, disastrous campaigns" (Gruenler). War was a profession of many people in England including a character of Chaucer's, the Knight had fought in at least 15 battles and had essentially built out his entire livelihood based upon the battles he was called upon by his lord to take part in. In essence, violence was a universally recognized form of justice and retribution something that was explicitly pointed out in Chaucer's stories.

Yet another theme is the presence of religion, or more specifically, the presence of corruption within religion. Many members of the pilgrimage have

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ties to religious office, and all but the Parson have in some way violated their vows or otherwise acted somewhat out of their bounds as a high ranking member of the Church. Chaucer illustrates this elegantly in the form of the Pardoner's prologue where he states " make an offering to my relics in this church [. . .] make an offering in the name of God, I shall absolve them by the authority of which was granted to me by papal bull" (Chaucer 288).

After telling the pilgrims of this trick, clearly aimed at pocketing a good deal of money, he explains, " By this trick I have gained a hundred marks year after year since I became a pardoner" (Chaucer 288). The Pardoner is not, however, the only immoral religious character involved in the pilgrimage. The Friar, for example, has broken his vows as a clerical member of the Church, most prominently his vow of chastity.

The Friar has engaged in relationships that have violated this vow, and when a child comes as a result of this interaction, he has gone so far as to marry the woman to her lover so as to cover his own tracks. All of these aspects of church corruption in The Canterbury Tales eventually come down to a desire for pleasure and money, something that plagued the legitimacy of the Catholic Church and eventually led to the religious reformation.

Among the characters a sort of social hierarchy became quickly apparent in the midst of these many travelers. A general character emerged that separated the pilgrims based upon their economic and social standings. There was a rather large contrast between the richest of the travelers and the poorest. For example, the Franklin was an owner of a large estate and lavish personal goods. Although he is deeply in debt, his social status is still far higher than that of say, the Plowman. The Plowman is one of the poorer

members of the pilgrimage, but despite this he is one of the more cheerful and charitable members of the pilgrimage. This can be seen as Chaucer's means of expressing his feelings toward the social hierarchy of the times.

Chaucer also weighs in on feudalism, the socioeconomic system of the time. "[Chaucer represents the] feudal arrangement of society [. . .] around the figure of the knight as a conception of nobility, and around the labourer a conception of commonality" (Morgan 8). Chaucer seems to see feudalism as a system that divides people into the wealthy nobles and the poor laborers. Chaucer also seems to recognize the presence of a middle class that seems to rise out of feudalism. For example, the figure of a merchant who gains his wealth by his own accord, specifically money trading, and is almost entirely independent of the feudal system.

The Merchant is described in the general prologue as "[a] responsible man [who] kept his wits about him [. . .] Nevertheless he was really a worthy man" (Chaucer 6). In short, Chaucer saw the social structure of his time and saw certain things he had disapproval of, but indeed, he saw some other parts of it as beneficial to the betterment of society.

To close, Chaucer's masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* exhibits many prevalent themes and in such a way paints a picture of the times. He does this by talk of violence, religious corruption, and social structuring, all of which were very pertinent bits of society in the time as they all formed a system that is looked back on and interpreted through works of fact and fiction such as *The Canterbury Tales*.