The Canterbury Tales: The Prologue

Start by visiting “The General Prologue” essay by Harvard's D.L. Benson:
http://bit.ly/1fhAlaW

- What was Chaucer primarily known as before he wrote the Canterbury Tales?

- What might his audience have thought upon hearing the beginning of the Prologue?

- How does Canterbury Tales differ from Boccaccio’s Decameron?

- Why was choosing a pilgrimage as the framing narrative of the tales a clever decision?

- What is the “problem” with Chaucer’s characters in the General Prologue?
Now check out “The General Prologue” by Brother Anthony from Sogang University:  

- What is the structure of the General Prologue?

- What does Chaucer seem to have a “special interest” in?

- Which pilgrims are the most idealized? What do they each represent?

- Describe the narrator.
Finally, navigate to “Pilgrims Passing to and Fro: The Life & Times of the Canterbury Tales Pilgrims.” (To go from one “Part” to the next, use the on-screen hyperlinks.)


Part 1

● When did Chaucer begin writing the Canterbury Tales? Why was this a dark period for Chaucer?

● Describe Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*’ audience.

● How does Chaucer arrange his introduction of the pilgrims?

● Compare and contrast the wealthiest and poorest of the pilgrims.
Part 2
• How did the plague impact the English social classes?

• What is a modern analog to the Middle Age’s pilgrimage?

Part 3
• What is unique to a work of fiction about the tavern and some of its workers?

• Why doesn’t Chaucer have to describe the places and sights along the pilgrimage?

Part 4
• What did a pilgrimage represent to a Medieval person?
The Canterbury Tales: The Prologue

Answer Key

- What was Chaucer primarily known as before he wrote the Canterbury Tales?
  Love poetry writer
- What might his audience have thought upon hearing the beginning of the Prologue?
  They may have assumed they were about to read another love poem.
- How does Canterbury Tales differ from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*?
  In Canterbury Tales, the characters are from many different social classes.
- Why was choosing a pilgrimage as the framing narrative of the tales a clever idea?
  A pilgrimage was a plausible excuse to have people from various social classes interacting more or less as peers.
- What is the “problem” with Chaucer’s characters in the General Prologue?
  They are largely morally suspect “scoundrels.”

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- What is the structure of the General Prologue?
  An introduction, followed by “portraits” of each pilgrim, then the setting up of the framing narrative of a storytelling contest
- What does Chaucer seem to have a “special interest” in?
  Religious figures whose lives differ from expectations
- Which pilgrims are the most idealized? What do they each represent?
  Parson: represents the “model churchman”
  Plowman: represents the “model lay [C]hristian”
- Describe the narrator.
  Though named “Chaucer” the narrator does not truly represent the author. The narrator is naive, uncritical, and not terribly intelligent (“My wit is short...”), but he tries to relay the pilgrim’s stories faithfully.

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Part 1

- When did Chaucer begin writing the Canterbury Tales? Why was this a dark period for Chaucer?
  He started writing it between 1385 and 1389, which was a tough time for him because his wife and many friends had died, he was facing financial hardship, he was homesick, and even the King’s court was a mess.
- Describe Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales’* audience.
  Chaucer saw his audience for this work to be a broad national audience, not his usual audience of only the highest classes.
- How does Chaucer arrange his introduction of the pilgrims?
  He arranges them explicitly to highlight their social relationships.
• Compare and contrast the wealthiest and poorest of the pilgrims. 
The Knight was the richest of the pilgrims, earning a pound in under two weeks, 
an income that would take the poorest of the pilgrims, the Ploughman, nearly six 
months to earn.

Part 2
• How did the plague impact the English social classes? 
The plague created room in the economy for the former serfs to move to the 
cities and become artisans, merchants, and similar things. This change improved 
the quality of life for many people born into poverty and created something akin to 
class mobility.
• What is a modern analog to the Middle Age’s pilgrimage? 
Taking a vacation

Part 3
• What is unique to a work of fiction about the tavern and some of its workers? 
The tavern and some of its workers actually existed in real life at the time of the 
writing.
• Why doesn’t Chaucer have to describe the places and sights along the 
pilgrimage? 
The places and sights were well-known to most readers.

Part 4
• What did a pilgrimage represent to a Medieval person? 
The journey through life, from the mortal realm to the afterlife

Notes:
There are many correct ways for students to word or express their answers for these 
questions. Therefore, this answer key is merely a guide to help you evaluate your 
students’ work. Answers given here may include quotations from the resources students 
are using. If your school blocks shortened links, the webpages needed for this webquest 
can be accessed at the following addresses:

• “The General Prologue” by Harvard University’s L.D. Benson
  ○ http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/gp/
• “The General Prologue” by Brother Anthony from Sogang University
  ○ http://hompi.sogang.ac.kr/anthony/Chaucer/Genpro.htm
• “Pilgrims Passing To and Fro: The Life & Times of the Canterbury Tales Pilgrims” 
  by James L. Matterer
  ○ http://www.godecookery.com/pilgrims/pilgrims.htm

Please note that web addresses can change! These are the most up-to-date URLs for 
the preceding resources as of publication, but web resources can move. Please use the 
descriptions given above to help find these resources if they do move.

Hannah Markwardt  http://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Hannah-Markwardt