Chaucer’s
The Canterbury Tales
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

1. Chaucer’s life

- Born about **1343**.
- The son of a **wine merchant**.
- Received an **excellent education**.
- His skill and **inventiveness** as a writer, a **clever mind** and **practical skills** helped him raise his social status.
- Worked as a **controller of the customs** for the port of London.
- Took part in important **diplomatic missions** (he travelled a lot, especially to France and Italy).
- Died in **1400** and was the first poet to be **buried in Westminster Abbey**, in the Poets’ Corner.
2. The Canterbury Tales

- It is a **narrative poem**.
- It is told **in verse**.
- It contains a variety of **narrative elements**: the setting in time and place, the description of characters, the use of a narrator.
- It has links with the **moral views** of the time.
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

3. The story

- **Thirty people**, including Chaucer as narrator, meet at the Tabard inn in London.
- They join a **pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral** and the shrine of Thomas Becket.
- The **innkeeper** suggests that every pilgrim should tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back; the pilgrim who tells the best story will win a free dinner.
- The various tales are both **religious and humorous, moral and satirical**.
4. The pilgrimage

• Why a pilgrimage to Canterbury?

- Canterbury Cathedral is the shrine of Thomas Beckett, England’s first martyr.
- Taking a pilgrimage was common in Chaucer’s day.
- People went on a pilgrimage to ask for healing or forgiveness of sins but also to socialise.
5. Social satire

It is an *estates satire* (a social satire)

**stock characters (stereotypes)** are presented, but they are also **individuals** (with their own personality, lifestyle, experiences)

from the **three orders** of society (the nobles, the clergy and the peasants) and from the **rising middle class**.
The three orders of medieval society:

- **The nobles** (those who fought): they held hereditary titles.

- **The clergy** (those who prayed): many of them came from noble families.

- **The peasants** (those who worked): they were 95% of the population; they were serfs to their lord.

For most of the Middle Ages this social structure remained unaltered, but in the 14th century, when the plague (the Black Death) killed up to a half of the population, some upward mobility began in the third order. Especially merchants became very rich.

Chaucer belonged to a family of merchants and moved up in the social ladder. In *The Canterbury Tales* he wrote about this new middle class.
6. The structure: the “pilgrimage” is the frame that contains all the stories. The idea is similar to Boccaccio’s “Decameron”.

A general prologue, where the pilgrims are introduced

Twenty-four tales

usually preceded by a prologue, which introduces the theme of the tale

and sometimes followed by an epilogue
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

7. The language

During the Middle Ages three languages were spoken in England: French (spoken by the Norman aristocracy), Anglo-Saxon (spoken by the natives) and Latin (spoken by the Church).

By the time Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*:
- English had replaced French as the language of education in the local schools.
- English was becoming the language of government.
- There was a growing demand for literary works in English.

• Chaucer created a literary language shaped by French and Latin models but built upon the old popular tradition and on a deep knowledge of actual speech. He is considered the “father of English poetry”.
8. Characterisation

- Chaucer wanted to give a portrait of English society.
- He introduced the characters in the General Prologue.
- He did not follow the social hierarchy of presentation of the time.
- He mixed female and male characters to underline the growing importance women were assuming within the middle classes.
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

8. Characterisation

• The descriptions of the pilgrims emphasise:
  - clothes;
  - tools;
  - personal qualities;
  - personality.

• The **names** given to the pilgrims **refer to their professions**.
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

Some important characters in the “Prologue”:

• **A knight:** with his son he is the only representative of the noble class. He has fought in many military campaigns, he represents the warlike aspect of nobility.

• **A prioress,** a member of the clergy. Chaucer’s description doesn’t highlight her faith but her elegant and refined manners in society, making fun of her.

• **The wife of Bath:** she doesn’t belong to any of the traditional medieval orders of society. She’s a member of the rising middle class: she’s a merchant and a woman. In describing her Chaucer uses a lot of irony.
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

**The Wife of Bath**

- It's written in rhyming couplets of iambic pentametres (= each line has ten syllables).

- The title tells us the social condition of this woman (she's a “wife”, actually a widow) and where she is from (Bath).

- Chaucer describes **various details of the Wife of Bath:**
  - Her **economic skills** (cloth-making) and **social skills** (she's very sociable and likes talking).
  - Her **clothes** (very refined)
  - Her social status (rich and with a high reputation)
  - Her physical appearance
  - **Her personality** (passionate)
Chaucer uses irony in his description:

- Some features of the character are exaggerated (many husbands, many pilgrimages, she dresses smartly...)

- She seems to be more interested in the social aspect of pilgrimage rather than in its religious aspect.

- The wife of Bath is both a stereotype (the rich lady) and an individual.

- She doesn't belong to any of the three orders of medieval society but she's a member of the new middle class.