

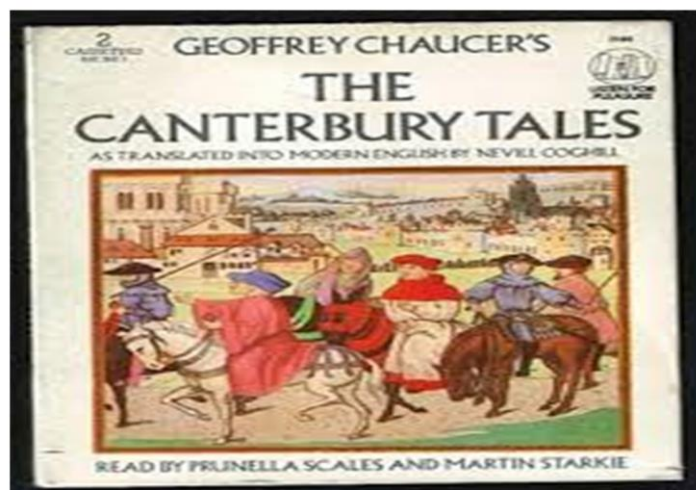
## MODULE 14

### THE CANTERBURY TALES

**OBJECTIVES OF THE MODULE:** This module will focus on Chaucer's landmark work, *The Canterbury Tales* and discuss its various aspects. It will focus on the social background which was a significant influence that went into the composition of this particular work along with other literary influences. It will also discuss the *General Prologue* which is an important part of the *Tales* and the various groups of pilgrims. It will highlight Chaucer's brilliance in the art of characterisation with the employment of irony and humour.

#### INTRODUCTION:

The English stage of Geoffrey Chaucer is considered as the stage of his greatest achievement when he composed one of the landmarks of English literature, *The Canterbury Tales*. It deals with the pilgrims who are going to pay a visit to the tomb of Thomas Becket at Canterbury and during the course of this journey meet at the Tabard Inn in Southwark where they are telling tales from diverse literary and folk sources to while away their time. Harry Bailey, the Host of the inn agrees to go along with the pilgrims and act as the master of ceremonies. Chaucer, with his keen power of observation and having great knowledge about human character, chooses the pilgrims from all ranks of the society from the chivalrous knight to the humble ploughman. This gives Chaucer the opportunity to blend his literary knowledge with his observant nature. Almost all the characters- knight, esquire, doctor, merchant, shipman, monk, friar, parson, miller, reeve, farmer, prioress- have been delineated by Chaucer in such details that it seems as if Chaucer has drawn his characters based on his experiences of real life.



#### INFORMATION BOX

Pilgrimage was a common feature of medieval times and the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury was one of the most popular English pilgrimages. There are even references that the Venetians organized package pilgrimage to the Holy Land which included food, transport and tolls. In *The Canterbury Tales* the pilgrims assemble at the Tabard Inn in Southwark at the southern end of London Bridge, the only bridge across the river Thames at that point of time.

## **SOCIAL BACKGROUND:**

It is interesting that in *The Canterbury Tales* only a few characters like the Knight, the Parson and the Plowman are delineated by Chaucer as ideal figures without any tinge of irony. The Knight is the representative of the highest forms of chivalry while the poor Parson is a Christian in the truest sense of the term. Again, the Plowman is not only good-hearted but also enormously hardworking. Considering the contemporary social background these characters are too good to believe, particularly keeping in mind that it was the age of Black Death, Peasants' Revolt and the Statute of Labourers. Moreover, corruption was rampant in the Church. In this kind of situation chivalry was a farce and all kinds of privileges were being enjoyed by a chosen minority while the common masses were immersed in misery, plight, economic deprivation and diseases. Considering these social and economic issues Chaucer's portrayal of the Knight, the Parson and the Plowman as almost ideal figures might suggest that these are nostalgic portraits through which Chaucer might comment obliquely on the troublesome issues of his contemporary times without being overtly critical about those.

## **GENERAL PROLOGUE:**

The *General Prologue*, probably written during the late 1380s, not only introduces the characters and sets the scene, but also explains the entire scheme of the *Tales*:

This is the point, to speken short and pleyn,

That ech of yow, to shorte with oureweye,

In this viagesheltelle tales tweye

To Canterbury-ward, I mene it so,

And homward he shaltellenother two,

Of adventures that whilom han bifalle.

790-795

The initial plan was to make each pilgrim narrate two tales during the journey to Canterbury and another two tales while coming back. However, the plan could not be fully executed because it was too ambitious a project. The *General Prologue* introduces twenty-six pilgrims, the five guildsmen being considered a group. Apart from them, the second Nun, the Nun's Priest, the Host and Chaucer himself also joined the pilgrimage. There is reference to another character who is the Canon's Yeoman. He is not described in the *General Prologue* because he joins the pilgrims near Canterbury.

Later Chaucer changes the plan and restricts the telling of tales to one per pilgrim. At the beginning of the *Parson's Tale* the Host declares: 'Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon' which clarifies the point that Chaucer now changes his initial plan and restricts each pilgrim to one tale only. However, he himself



narrates two tales because his first tale, *The Tale of Sir Thopas* was left incomplete because of the interruption made by the Host.

The *General Prologue* serves as an introduction to the entire text describing most of the pilgrims, but not all of them. It is followed by groups of tales, though the groups are not directly linked with each other. Many of the tales have individual prologues where the teller prefers to introduce his story. Sometimes such a prologue also contains comments on earlier stories. Towards the beginning of the *General Prologue*, Chaucer explains his intention to describe his fellow-pilgrims in three categories:

To telle yow al the condicioun

Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,

And whiche they weren, and of what degree,

And eek in what array that they were inne.

38-41

So Chaucer plans to describe them as 'whiche they weren', that is, what kind of people they were, 'of what degree', that is, which social rank the pilgrims belong to and 'in what array', that is, their appearance. However, this categorization is not followed in this order. In fact, the items which should come together are often found separated. For instance, the order followed in the description of the Squire seems to be odd and highlights the point referred to above. The Squire is described as a lover with curly hair, he was twenty years old, having strongly built body, having fought with the hope of winning his beloved's favour, has fashionable taste as far as dressing is concerned, has the ability to do everything suitable for a young man in love, is humble and sits opposite to his father at table. This random selection of different traits of characters and the casualness associated with their delineation make the character portrayals realistic. This lack of order or the casualness associated with the order lends an air of spontaneity, innocence and naturalness to the style of writing. It



enhances the ironic effect as well.

#### LITERARY INFLUENCES:

Chaucer was deeply influenced by Boccaccio for the general idea of this poem. Boccaccio's *Decameron* is built upon a similar idea since it is a collection of a hundred stories narrated by ten people belonging to the gentle class who in order to escape from a plague take refuge in a palace. However, it is not certain if Chaucer was acquainted with *Decameron* because if he was familiar with it, he should have referred to it in his own work. Moreover, Chaucer's magnum opus is much more comprehensive in scope in comparison to Boccaccio's work. A closer resemblance can be found in Giovanni Sercambi's *Novelle* which refers to a pilgrimage, a leader and by-play among the pilgrims. Again, there is no evidence that Chaucer was familiar with this work. Whatever the influences be that went into the composition of *The Canterbury Tales*, all those influences are tempered by Chaucer's English sensibility.

#### **NOVELTY IN CHARACTER PORTRAYAL:**

Before Chaucer, literature embraced all kinds of subjects dealing with diverse emotions and themes like love, honour, pangs of separation, reconciliation, history, religion, so on and so forth. However, as the writers started to be individualistic, the same happened with the members of the society. Hence we find Chaucer depicting the characters like the knight, the wife of Bath, the miller, the prioress as individuals with their own identities and differences. They are not only representative of their own social class, but are individuated: the ulcer of the Cook, the wart of the Miller, the dirty tunic of the Knight, the carving of the Squire, the wide-spaced teeth of the Wife of Bath- all these physical details make the character portrayals realistic and individual. The readers recognise the characters sometimes by the harsh tone of the voice, sometimes by the complexion and at times by the sensitiveness of a lady to cry at the sight of a mouse which is caught. It is striking that Chaucer or the narrator does not become overtly judgemental about the characters. Rather, with his enormous range of vision and broad genial humour, he allows his readers freedom to form their own opinion about the characters based on the ironic gap between what the characters think about themselves and what others think about them.

#### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INN:**

Tabard Inn at Southwark has a very crucial role in *The Canterbury Tales*. It is a meeting place and stresses upon the importance of drinking and conviviality in this society. It reminds us of *Beowulf*. However, the society depicted here is a new social order where we find people belonging to diverse sections of the society coming together. So the inn here is representative of the society at large in a miniature form.

#### **ROLE OF THE HOST:**

*The Canterbury Tales* being a collection of stories told by different pilgrims coming from diverse social backgrounds and possessing divergent qualities and habits, Chaucer never forgets to maintain a connecting link between all of them. He does this in various ways, one of which is the introduction of the character of the Host. He is presented as frank and boisterous with a rich sense of humour. He is present throughout bridging all differences amongst the pilgrims, sorting out quarrels, providing confidence to the shy ones and keeping everyone in good spirits. The Host also proves to be a source of humour and irony. The usual method of cutting short a tiresome story is made all the more ironic when the Host raises objection to Chaucer's own story, thus enhancing the comic and ironic effects.

## AN ANTHOLOGY OF MEDIEVAL LITERATURE:

As a collection of separate tales, *The Canterbury Tales* provides a brilliant anthology of medieval literature. The *Knight's Tale* and the story of Constance narrated by the Man of Law represent the courtly romance tradition while *Sir Thopas* offers a parody of the popular romance as *Guy of Warwick* or *Bevis of Hampton*. Elements of Breton lay with supernatural touches, fidelity towards lovers, and setting in Brittany- all can be found in *Franklin's Tale*. A retelling of classical legend can be located in the *Physician's Tale* of Virginius who kills his own daughter to save her honour. *The Parson's Tale* can be considered as a sermon having its own didactic purposes while a remarkable example of beast fable can be found in the story of Chauntecleer and Dame Pertelot told by the Nun's Priest. Even elements of lyric can be traced in the 'Invocation to Mary' in the *Second Nun's Tale*. Thus *The Canterbury Tales* seems to be a storehouse of every possible genre of medieval literature handled magnificently by Chaucer.

## THE "GROUPS":

*The Canterbury Tales* begins with great clarity. After journeying for a short while the Host asks the pilgrims to draw lots and the Knight becomes the first one to tell a tale. He narrates a story of two friends, Arcite and Palamon, who fall in love with the same lady. Being very pleased with the story the Host invites the Monk for the next one. However, the Miller being intoxicated becomes insistent to become the next story-teller. He relates a vulgar tale about a carpenter and the Reeve who is of 'carpenteris craft' feels humiliated by this and taking offence tells an indecent tale about a miller. The Cook enjoys this story thoroughly and becomes eager to share a joke about an apprentice. But three humorous stories in a row could perhaps lead to an imbalance and thus Chaucer stops after fifty lines of the *Cook's Tale*. Till this point the sequence of tales is pretty clear. Other stories are tied up in groups. However, the arrangement of the groups is not specified. Most of the modern editions follow the arrangement of the Ellesmere manuscript the details of which are furnished below:

### ELLESMERE ARRANGEMENT

Group I (A): *General Prologue, Knight's Tale, Miller's Prologue and Tale, Reeve's Prologue and Tale, Cook's Prologue and Tale*

Group II (B1): *Man of Law's Prologue and Tale*

Group III (D): *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, Friar's Prologue and Tale, Summoner's Prologue and Tale*

Group IV (E): *Clerk's Prologue and Tale, Merchant's Prologue and Tale*

Group V (F): *Squire's Prologue and Tale, Franklin's Prologue and Tale*

Group VI (C): *Physician's Tale, Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*

Group VII (B2): *Shipman's Tale, Prioress' Prologue and Tale, Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas, Melibeus, Monk's Prologue and Tale, Nun's Priest's Prologue and Tale*

Group VIII (G): *Second Nun's Prologue and Tale, Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*

Group IX (H): *Manciple's Prologue and Tale*

Group X (I): *Parson's Prologue and Tale, Retraction.*

The letters in parenthesis indicate an alternative arrangement made by some modern editors to clarify certain inconsistencies regarding the time scheme.

It should be mentioned here that Groups III, IV and V might be considered as a longer group as far as the subject matter is concerned. This is sometimes referred to as the Marriage Group since most of the stories deal with the problems pertaining to marriage. The topic is brought to the front by the Wife of Bath who believes in a very earthy philosophy of life. She has already had five husbands and does not have any problem to take the sixth one. She is quite candid to assert her disapproval about virginity which according to many should be preferred to matrimony. She is absolutely inhibition-free to talk about her former husbands and her sheer command over them. She has firm conviction that happiness in marriage can only be achieved by accepting the superiority of the wife and the story she relates is only to prove her viewpoint more convincingly. After this debatable story which could have raised many objections, begins a quarrel between the Friar and the Summoner. When each finishes his tale and cools down the Clerk is invited to relate a story. The story of the Wife of Bath is in stark contrast to that of the Clerk which stresses upon the submission of a woman to her husband and how her patience is rewarded with marital bliss and happiness. Next comes the Merchant who tells the story of January and May which is a fabliau about an old man getting married to a young girl and how he is tricked by the latter disgracefully. This is followed by the Squire's Tale which is a fragment of Eastern romance and has no relation with marriage directly. However, the tale told by the Franklin is the story of the married couple Arviragus and Dorigen. It describes a happy conjugal relationship based on love, confidence, patience and self-control. Since the Marriage Group sequence comes to an end with the *Franklin's Tale*, it would not be impertinent to consider the Franklin's thoughts about marriage to be Chaucer's own viewpoints.

Certain groupings can also be formulated from the way the pilgrims are described by Chaucer in the *General Prologue* though whether these distinctions were made intentionally by Chaucer can never be confirmed. However, there is no harm to make discussions about the characters on the basis on those groupings. Chaucer, quite clearly, asserts that he has not put the pilgrims in any order of rank

or degree. But he begins with the Knight who is travelling along with his son, the Squire and his attendant, the Yeoman. These pilgrims together can be regarded as the first group. The Knight is portrayed as chivalrous showing *curteisie, trouthe* and *freedom*. He is always ready to defend Christendom against the barbarians and is undertaking this pilgrimage immediately after coming back from an expedition which points at his deep religious mindset. The Knight's son is a young man of twenty years who has fought closer to home and fervently hopes to win a reputation that might help him to earn his lady's favour and attention. However, though he is fashionable dressed, it does not take away the humility from him. He is modest enough to understand that he is only a beginner in his role of a knight and is serving simply as an apprentice. The Yeoman is an epitome of discipline and efficiency. He is all set to use his equipment whenever there is any need for it. His role is that of a *forster* or bailiff in the estate of the Knight. Chaucer employs negligible quantity of satire in the delineation of the pilgrims belonging to this group.

The Prioress, the Monk and the Friar, all belonging to the religious community and associated with the regular administration of the church form the second group of pilgrims. The Prioress holds an important position since she heads the convent. But the way she is presented to the readers remind us more of a heroine of a romance rather than a nun which she actually is. She is *faire and fetisly, welytaught, plesaunt and amyable* possesses grey eyes and rosebud mouth. She is elegant, keeps small dogs and feeds them on the best bread. The readers almost tend to forget that she is a nun and that is because of Chaucer's ambivalent mode of presentation of her character, though he is not severely harsh or critical about her. While the Prioress is tender-hearted and charming, the Monk is strong, energetic, prosperous and radical in his outlook. He is boastful about the fact that he does not remain confined within the code of conduct prescribed for a monk. During Chaucer's time many monasteries acquiring large estates required efficient management and this monk was also associated with such duty. Thus he came across prosperous landowners having strong liking for luxurious living and hunting. The Monk's plump figure, dazzling crown, expensive boots, fine horse and obsession with hunting all testify his association with wealthy people from whom he has imbibed gross self-love and indulgence. Same is the case with the Friar. Forgetting all about his evangelical duties of reaching out to the poor and ill, and leading his own life in absolute poverty, Chaucer's Friar is clad in expensive clothes and is a frequent visitor to the taverns. He is also a matchmaker and entertainer along with being a confessor of the rich. Chaucer has adopted diverse means in order to comment upon these three characters- he chooses to be tolerant in the delineation of the Prioress, satirical in the character sketch of the Monk and critical in the portrayal of the Friar.

The third group of pilgrims is a huge one including the Merchant, the Clerk, the Lawyer, the Franklin, the five Guildsmen and their Cook, the Shipman, the Physician and the Wife of Bath. All of them belong to the middle class and their characterization is largely based on their materialistic and mercenary attitude. The first one of this group is the Merchant who in his attempt to bring an air of responsibility and dependability around him speaks very formally. But, nevertheless, he is not only unimpressive but also financially unstable:

This worthy man ful well his wit bisette:

Therwiste no wight that he was in dette.

Chaucer's satirical tone in the portrayal of the Merchant's character might lead us to ponder whether this character was inspired by any real life merchant of Chaucer's time. The Clerk seems to be somewhat mismatch in this group because he is the only one who is not interested in any worldly and material possession except books. In contrast to almost all the characters he is thin (which suggests his simple lifestyle in contrast to the luxury associated with the lives of other characters) and is sincerely devoted to his studies without any aim of monetary gain. In sharp contrast to the Clerk is the Lawyer who is not at all hesitant to put his knowledge into practical uses and thus acquiring money out of it. The Franklin is also a wealthy fellow but he uses his wealth socially and does not seem to be much eager to acquire more money. He is praised for his hospitality and for his roles as the Justice of Peace, Member of Parliament, sheriff and auditor of taxes. The slight criticism against him is for his old-fashioned ideas and his uncomfortable behaviour in important company. The carpenter, weaver, haberdasher, dyer and tapestry maker together form a group of the five Guildsmen. No one of them relates a tale but the Cook accompanying them starts telling one. The Guildsmen belong to the religious guild and are quite socially-conscious. Their uniform and accoutrements are impressive and something new for the pilgrimage. All of them are in good shape and are suitable to become aldermen. Their Cook is also quite competent except for a sore on his shin. The Host is critical about the standard of hygiene that he maintains. There is no doubt about the Shipman's efficiency in seamanship but he is involved in stealing from the cargo and even piracy. The Physician is an affluent person gaining lot of money from plague. He tries to impress people through his talk and is careful both about his health and money. However, Chaucer seems to have certain respect for this man of medicine. The last one to appear in this group is the Wife of Bath who claims to be a blend of Mars and Venus thus being both pugnacious and amorous in her disposition. She being a cloth-maker is directly associated with commerce, cloth-making being a flourishing trade in the contemporary society. Her boldness and unorthodox views about marriage make her a different and striking character.

#### INFORMATION BOX

Medieval medicine was a unique combination of classical and Arab authorities on the one hand and dependence on astrology on the other. Consulting astrology was needed to cast horoscopes for birth, the beginning of illness and for finding the most suitable time to administer a cure. The medicines were prescribed with the aim to restore the balance of the fluids or humours in the body upon which depended the temperament of a person.

Two pilgrims belong to the next group. They are the saintly Parson and the humble Plowman. Chaucer's Parson is a 'shepherde and noght a mercenarie', he is a 'lernerd man' and a perfect example of Christian charity. He prefers to remain at home and extend his help to his parishioners rather than being an absentee priest. The Plowman is like his brother and loves both God and his neighbour. His poor financial status is reflected through the condition of the mare he rides and the coat he puts on. Chaucer chooses to idealize both these characters.

The last group is a bit longish:

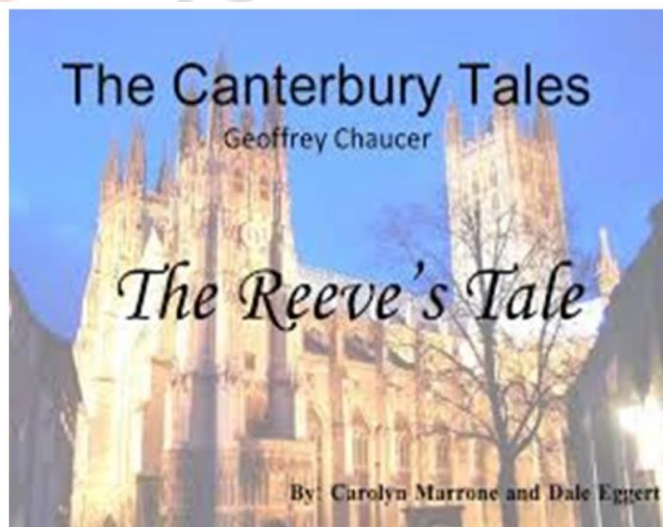
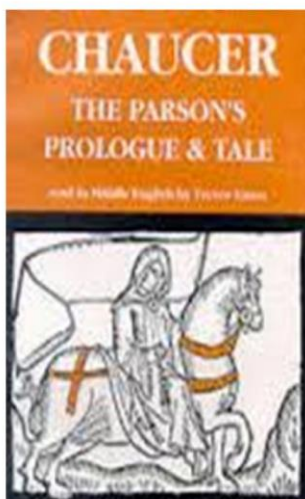
There was also a Reve, and a Millere,

A Somnour, and a Pardoner also,



A Manciple, and myself- ther were namo.

The Reeve is a spare and cunning character who petrifies the peasants over whom he has complete control being the manorial foreman. Exploiting the peasants he ensures his own comfortable living and even deceives his master by managing to lend him goods which should be his by rights. Unlike the Reeve who is withdrawn by nature the Miller is not only a talker but is also a quarrelsome person who does not even hesitate to oppose the Host as master of ceremonies. In between the descriptions of the Reeve and the Miller comes the Manciple whose personal details are not available. His temperament can be understood from the misuse he makes of his position as a purchasing officer in order to cheat a group of men much more learned than he himself. The Summoner has been delineated as a loathsome figure, both in external appearance and the mental makeup. His face is ugly with pimples and spots and is frightening for children. Equally repulsive is his diet. He does not hesitate to blackmail young people with the aim of extracting money from them and does not miss a single opportunity to do all kinds of wrong things for his own monetary gain. The perfect match for him is the Devil himself. Chaucer's Pardoner uses a sermon to tell his tale and is marvellous in singing at the church. But these qualities become insignificant when we come to know about his corrupt nature. He does not feel any pricking of the conscience to sell false relics and beguile the sinners willing to buy pardons. He is presented as an effeminate being with thin yellow hair lying in strands over his shoulders and his fascination for exhibitionism. This description not only speaks about his physicality but also stresses upon his spiritual deformity. It is humorous and noteworthy that Chaucer places himself in the midst of all these corrupt and mercenary pilgrims. However, there is no description of Chaucer here. The readers are left to form their impression



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about him from the diverse reactions of his fellow pilgrims.

### INFORMATION BOX

In the Middle Ages there were ecclesiastical and secular courts of law. The Summoner used to be the bearer of summons to the ecclesiastical court which was presided over by the bishop or the archdeacon. He was also responsible to make sure that the offenders appeared in the court and was vigilant for indictable offences. Since moral offences as well as offences against the church were tried in the ecclesiastical court, there were ample opportunities for the Summoner to receive bribes. Pardons were remissions of temporal punishment and it was believed that pardons could be bought. There were genuine pardoners who were licensed to sell indulgences with the aim of raising money for the church. However, this system had its own flaw and created several frauds who used to sell false relics. Because of this rampant corruption, pardoners were abolished by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century.

### INCONSISTENCIES:

There are certain inconsistencies in *The Canterbury Tales* as the Second Nun addresses herself as an 'unworthy son of Eve', the Man of Law declares that 'I speak in prose' and chooses verse to speak in, the Shipman in his reference to the 'housebonde' who would clothe and pay for 'us' projects himself as a woman. The *Shipman's Tale* seems to be written for the Wife of Bath and that is why this 'good felawe' whose beard has witnessed many tempests alludes to himself as a woman. Other inconsistencies can be located in the speaker of the *Merchant's Tale* beginning to talk as if he is a cleric while the Host addresses the Cook for a second time as though he had not begun his tale.

### CONCLUSION:

The *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales* succeeds to set the scene and establish the characters. This masterpiece is an unfinished work and is marked by a fresh approach to literature, brilliant use of irony, humour and spontaneity. Chaucer's followers lacked both his range of vision and the technical skill and it was only after the arrival of Shakespeare into the English literary scene that Chaucer's unique combination of broad genial humour, penetrating insight into characters, range of knowledge and sheer technical mastery could be compared with.

### QUESTIONS

#### ESSAY TYPE:

1. Discuss the significance of the *General Prologue* of *The Canterbury Tales*.
2. Critically comment on the second and fifth groups of pilgrims as delineated by Chaucer.
3. Do you find any similarity between the characters of the first and fourth groups of pilgrims? Give reasons.
4. What is meant by the 'Marriage Group'? How integrally linked is the Wife of Bath with this group? What idea about her character can be formed from Chaucer's presentation of her?

SHORT QUESTIONS:

1. Discuss the role of the Host.
2. Do you think that the characters of the Knight, the Parson and the Plowman are commentary on Chaucer's contemporary times? Give reasons.
3. Comment on the literary influences that went into the making of *The Canterbury Tales*.
4. Why is *The Canterbury Tales* considered as an anthology of medieval literature?
5. Comment on the significance of the inn.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Where were the pilgrims destined to go?
2. Name the characters that have been idealized by Chaucer.
3. Which tale of Chaucer was interrupted by the Host?
4. What kind of story did the Miller tell?
5. Why is the clerk a mismatch in the third group of pilgrims?

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