

Medieval Narratives

Imagine you are living in London, England, in the year 1398, and you are similar to the type of person you are now: a student reading and learning about literature. What would you be reading? As an educated person in the 14th century, what might be of interest to you?

COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:

RL 3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story. **RL 6** Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., irony).

RL 9 Demonstrate knowledge of foundational works of literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

The Medieval Reader

By the end of the 14th century, a typical Londoner who could read would have been interested in **narratives**—a type of writing that relates a series of events—written in verse. Typical **medieval narratives** included ballads, romances, allegories, and moral tales. Most of them were religious in theme, but many others were concerned with love, exemplary life and behavior, and political and societal issues. Although comedy and humor are not something we often associate with the Middle Ages, the medieval mind had a sophisticated sense of irony and a taste for comic narratives, which were, in fact, common.



Detail of *Lydgate and the Canterbury Pilgrims leaving Canterbury* (1520)

Between 1350 and 1400, a large body of narrative works was produced in England. These were written in Middle English, a language that had developed and replaced the use of French, which had been the predominant language of educated people in Britain. Literacy had become more common, and books were more widely available, although they were still copied by hand; thus, educated citizens had access to more literary works. Popular narratives of the time included *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (page 230) and the King Arthur romance (page 248), with their themes of chivalry, love, and religious devotion; William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (page 124), an allegory that exposed the corruption of church, state, and society; and Geoffrey Chaucer's groundbreaking work, *The Canterbury Tales* (page 144). It was Chaucer, with his sense of humor, style, and realistic characterizations, who overshadowed his peers and became known to subsequent generations as one of the greatest poets in the history of English literature.

Characteristics of Chaucer's Style

Chaucer had no illusions about humanity, and yet his works show a compassion and fondness for human nature with all its faults and idiosyncrasies. Though *The Canterbury Tales* went unfinished, it is the work that best exhibits his unique style, which encompasses a variety of traits.

CHAUCER'S FRAME STORY



- **Imagery and Figurative Language** Chaucer uses sparse but vivid imagery and figurative language to describe his characters' physical appearance, as in his depiction of the Summoner: "His face on fire, like a cherubin, / For he had carbuncles."
- **Irony** The contrast between expectation and reality is known as irony. The ironist seems to be writing with tongue in cheek, and Chaucer is a master of it. While calling attention to his characters' faults, he also emphasizes their essential humanity. This gives his writing a tone of detachment and compassion. Note the irony he uses in his description of the Doctor, one of the pilgrims described in "The Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*.

Yet he was rather close as to expenses
And kept the gold he won in pestilences.
Gold stimulates the heart, or so we're told.
He therefore had a special love of gold.

—from "The Prologue"

- **Characterization** A writer develops characters by describing their physical appearance, making direct statements about them, and allowing them to express their personalities through dialogue. In *The Canterbury Tales*, each of Chaucer's characters is also clearly differentiated by the type of story he or she tells and the voice in which each tale is told. Compare these two passages, the first narrated by the Pardoner, and the second narrated by the Wife of Bath.

It's of three rioters I have to tell
Who, long before the morning service bell,
Were sitting in a tavern for a drink.

—from "The Pardoner's Tale"

Others assert we women find it sweet
When we are thought dependable, discreet
And secret, firm of purpose and controlled,
Never betraying things that we are told.

—from "The Wife of Bath's Tale"

The **frame story** is a literary device that joins together one or more stories within a larger story, or frame. Frame stories have been used throughout the world and date back to antiquity. The *Panchatantra*, a collection of Sanskrit fables gathered around 200 B.C., is an ancient Indian example of a frame story. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (page 208) is a well-known Italian frame story in which a collection of stories are told by different characters.

The Canterbury Tales is one of the most famous examples of the frame story. In his innovative use of the device, Chaucer interwove the frame with the tales. The plot of the frame involves pilgrims on a pilgrimage who are challenged to compete in telling the best tale. Chaucer reveals the pilgrims' personalities not only through their interactions between tales but also by the tales they tell. As a result, the frame itself acts as a long and engaging narrative whole.

Close Read

On the basis of these excerpts, how would you characterize the narrator of each tale?