Geoffrey Chaucer

c. 1343-1400

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Geoffrey Chaucer

• Often called the “father of English poetry”
  – During Chaucer’s time, language of literature, science, diplomacy, and religion were Latin and French
  – Before Chaucer, it was not fashionable for serious poets to write in English—people felt that English couldn’t possibly convey all the nuances and complexities of serious literature
  – Chaucer made English language respectable
    • Chaucer wrote in the vernacular—the everyday language spoken in London and the East midlands
Friends in high places

• Chaucer was born into a middle class London family not long after the beginning of the Hundred Years’ War
  – Father: wine merchant
  – Had some education—he read a lot; had some legal training
  – Became page to an important family
    • Received training in good manners
  – Worked for the government
    • Had several noble patrons
• Was captured in France while a soldier during the 100 Years’ War
  – Important enough to have king contribute to his ransom.
• Married; at least 2 children
• Served as king’s ambassador in Europe on several occasions
• 1367 awarded the first of several pensions for his services to the Crown (incl. a daily pitcher of wine)
• 1385 appointed justice for the peace in Kent
• Later becomes a member of Parliament—served and enjoyed the king’s protection
Writing and Holding a Job

• While Chaucer was a relatively important government servant, his work took precedence over his writing
• He wrote a great deal, sometimes for personal advancement (e.g. poem in memory of his patron’s wife)
• 1374-1375—wrote several great allegorical poems: *House of Fame* and *Parliament of Fowls*, and the love story *Trollus and Cristyde*. 
The Italian Connection

- 1372-1378 travelled to Italy
  - Influenced by Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio
  - Like Boccaccio, Chaucer uses a framing device within which the characters tell their stories

- 1387 begins writing *The Canterbury Tales*
  - Never completed the stories

- Considered one of the greatest works in the English language
The Force of Personality

• Why is CT considered great?
  – Chaucer’s language
  – Chaucer’s spirit and personality
  – An optimist, full of faith
  – Skill with irony
The End of the Old Alliterative Anglo-Saxon World

• Dominant form is iambic pentameter (duh-DUM, duh DUM, duh DUM, duh DUM, duh DUM)
  – Most popular meter in English
  – Old alliterative world of Anglo-Saxons is gone; he introduced the poetic world used by Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Robert Frost
Chaucer died October 25, 1400 according to his tombstone (Westminster Abbey 1556). Buried in Poet’s Corner, Westminster Abbey, London
The Canterbury Tales

• Is a collection of stories
• Is a snapshot of life in the Middle Ages
• Characters are on a pilgrimage, a religious journey, to the shrine of Thomas a Becket in Canterbury
• People are from many stations of life, like on a tour bus
• They travel on horseback from London to Canterbury—about 55 miles one way
• Begins with a general Prologue which establishes that the pilgrimage takes place in the spring, the time of new life and awakening

• The poet-pilgrim narrator, whom many consider to be Chaucer himself, starts out at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, a borough in the south of London
• 29 other pilgrims are also bound for Canterbury
• After dinner, the host suggests to the pilgrims they exchange tales to pass time along the way to Canterbury and back to London
• The Host’s suggestion sets up Chaucer’s frame story—the main story of the pilgrimage that includes each pilgrim's story
• The Prologue introduces each of the pilgrims
• It is a quest story: it moves from images of spring and awakening at the beginning to images of penance, death, and eternal life in the Parson’s tale at the end of the work.
• Each of the pilgrim storytellers are in search of renewal at the shrine of Thomas a Becket.
  – Because they come from every walk of life, they represent “Everyman”, or all of us, on our universal pilgrimage through life
Why the Shrine of Thomas a Becket?

• The Church believed that Becket’s body and blood had the power to cure.

• Many pilgrims went to his shrine to be healed, but some went for other reasons. For example, Chaucer’s Knight is on a pilgrimage to give thanks for his successful military campaigns.
Literary Focus: Characterization

• Methods of characterization:
  – How the character looks and dresses
  – How the character speaks and acts
– What the character thinks and feels
– How others respond to the character
– The narrator may tell us directly what the character’s nature is—virtuous, vain, clever, etc.
— Because he has 29 characters to introduce in the Prologue, Chaucer could not develop each character at length so he provides a few well-chosen details about each that make each stand out vividly.

— Chaucer often uses Satire—A kind of writing that ridicules human weakness, vice, or folly in order to bring about social reform

  • Note that the character details of some of the pilgrims often don’t conform with what the characters think about themselves or would like others to think about them.
Frame Story

— A story within a story.
Chaucer uses
the outer story of the
pilgrimage to bind together each
of the pilgrim's
individual stories.