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The Canterbury Tales Character Description

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Chaucer’s Canterbury Pilgrims: A Detailed Character Description Guide

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is one of the most celebrated works in English literature, largely because of its unforgettable cast of characters. Written in the late 14th century, the poem presents a group of pilgrims traveling from London to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury. Each pilgrim tells a story, but the true genius of the work lies in the rich, often satirical character descriptions Chaucer provides in the General Prologue. Understanding **The Canterbury Tales character description** is essential for any student of literature, as these portraits reveal the social, religious, and economic realities of medieval England. In this article, we will explore the major pilgrims in detail, examining their appearances, personalities, and the subtle satire Chaucer weaves into every description.

The Social Hierarchy of the Pilgrims

Chaucer organizes his pilgrims loosely by social rank, beginning with the highest-status figures and moving downward. This structure allows him to comment on every level of 14th-century society, from the noble Knight to the humble Plowman. The **Canterbury Tales character description** is not merely physical; Chaucer uses clothing, speech, and behavior to reveal each pilgrim’s moral character and social aspirations. The result is a vivid cross-section of medieval life that remains compelling more than six hundred years later.

The Knight: The Ideal of Chivalry

The Knight is the first pilgrim described, and Chaucer presents him as the embodiment of knightly virtue. He is a worthy man who has fought in many crusades and battles, always following the code of chivalry, truth, and honor. His **character description** emphasizes his humility: his tunic is stained from his armor, and he does not boast of his achievements. The Knight is modest, wise, and courteous, “as meeke as is a mayde.” Chaucer carefully avoids satire here, suggesting that the Knight represents an ideal that was already fading in the late 14th century. His son, the Squire, provides an interesting contrast, as he is more concerned with fashion and romance than with martial prowess.

The Squire: Youth and Romantic Idealism

The Squire is the Knight’s son, a young man of about twenty years. He is described as “a lovyere and a lusty bacheler,” with curly locks and fashionable clothes embroidered like a meadow. His character description highlights his energy and skill: he can sing, dance, draw, write, and joust. Unlike his father, the Squire is more focused on courtly love and impressing women than on serious military campaigns. Chaucer’s tone here is affectionate but gently mocking, as the Squire represents the youthful preoccupation with appearance and romance.

The Prioress: A Study in Affected Gentility

Character description table

Another character description table in the General Prologue is that of the Prioress, also called Madame Eglantine. She smiles demurely and speaks French, though Chaucer notes that her French is that of Stratford-at-Bow, not Paris. Her table manners are impeccable: she never lets a morsel fall from her lips and wipes her mouth so clean that no grease remains on her cup. The **description** of her physical appearance is striking: she wears a coral trinket, a brooch engraved with “Amor Vincit Omnia” (Love Conquers All), and her cloak is neatly pleated. The satire here is subtle but clear: the Prioress is more concerned with worldly elegance and courtly behavior than with her religious vows. Her tenderness toward small animals—feeding her dogs roasted meat—further underscores her misplaced priorities.

The Monk: A Lover of Pleasure

Chaucer’s Monk is another religious figure who has strayed far from his calling. The **Canterbury Tales character description** of the Monk reveals a man who loves hunting, eating, and fine clothing. He rejects the traditional monastic rules that call for manual labor and study, preferring to ride horses and keep greyhounds. His sleeves are trimmed with fur, and his hood is fastened with a gold pin shaped like a love knot. The Monk is described as “a manly man,” and Chaucer satirizes his hypocrisy without condemning him outright. The Monk’s priorities are worldly, and he represents the corruption and laxity that had crept into many medieval monasteries.

The Friar: A Corrupt Mendicant

The Friar, named Hubert, is one of the most sharply satirized characters in the Prologue. He is described as a “wantowne and a merye” man who is well acquainted with tavern keepers and barmaids but avoids the poor and sick. The **character description** emphasizes his silver-tongued flattery: he can absolve sins for a fee and is known for his skill in singing and playing the harp. His cloak is full of pins and knives for gifts, a detail that shows how he bribes his way into favor. Chaucer exposes the Friar’s greed and corruption with biting irony, making him a memorable figure of religious hypocrisy.

The Merchant and the Clerk: Contrasting Intellectuals

Two other figures worth exploring in any **Canterbury Tales character description** study are the Merchant and the Clerk. The Merchant is a shrewd businessman who talks constantly of his profits and losses. He wears a Flemish beaver hat and elegantly buckled boots, suggesting a man who cares about appearances. Chaucer hints that the Merchant may be in debt, but he maintains a dignified front. In sharp contrast, the Clerk of Oxford is a poor scholar who would rather have twenty books of Aristotle than fine clothes or a fiddle. His horse is as lean as a rake, and his own clothes are threadbare. The Clerk is devoted to learning and speaking “sownynge in moral vertu,” making him one of the few genuinely admirable characters in the company.

The Wife of Bath: A Force of Nature

No discussion of **The Canterbury Tales character description** would be complete without examining the Wife of Bath, one of Chaucer’s most vivid creations. She is a skilled cloth maker from Bath, somewhat deaf, and remarkably experienced in marriage—she has had five husbands, not counting other “company in youth.” Her **character description** is unforgettable: she wears a large hat, red stockings, and sharp spurs on her shoes. Her face is bold and red, and she gap-toothed, which in Chaucer’s time was considered a sign of a lusty nature. The Wife of Bath is confident, outspoken, and unapologetically worldly. She knows all about love, marriage, and the art of getting her own way. Chaucer presents her with a mixture of humor, admiration, and moral ambiguity, making her one of the most debated characters in English literature.

The Parson and the Plowman: The True Christians

Among the pilgrims, the Parson and the Plowman stand out as genuinely good and humble people. The Parson is a poor country priest who lives his faith rather than preaching it. His **character description** emphasizes his dedication: he visits his parishioners on foot, rain or shine, and gives generously to the poor. He is “riche … of hooly thoght and werk,” a stark contrast to the Monk and the Friar. His brother, the Plowman, is equally virtuous. He works hard, pays his tithes faithfully, and loves God and his neighbor. These two characters represent

Chaucer's ideal of authentic Christian living, simple and unpretentious.

The Miller and the Reeve: The Lower Orders

Chaucer's **character descriptions** of the lower-class pilgrims are often the most colorful and comedic. The Miller is a large, powerful man with a red beard and a mouth like a furnace door. He is described as a "bagpipe" player and a teller of ribald stories. His physical **description**emphasizes his strength and coarseness: he has a wart on his nose with a tuft of red hairs, and he is skilled at stealing grain from his customers. The Reeve, by contrast, is a slender, choleric man who manages his lord's estate with cunning efficiency. He is described as a "wel good wrighte," a carpenter by trade, and he rides at the back of the group on a dappled horse. The rivalry between the Miller and the Reeve becomes a running theme in the tales they tell.

The Summoner and the Pardoner: The Most Corrupt Pilgrims

The Summoner and the Pardoner are perhaps the most openly corrupt figures in the entire company. The Summoner's **character description** is grotesque: his face is covered in pimples and boils, his eyes are narrow and scabby, and he is fond of garlic, onions, and strong wine. He is a lecherous man who will accept bribes to let sinners off easy. The Pardoner, who rides with the Summoner, is even more disturbing. His **description** notes that he has long, yellow hair, a thin voice, and no beard, suggesting a feminine or ambiguous appearance. He sells fake relics and pardons to gullible people, openly admitting that his motive is money. Chaucer's satire here is at its most savage, exposing the worst abuses of the medieval church.

The Host and Other Minor Pilgrims

The Host, Harry Bailey, is the organizer of the story-telling contest. He is described as a large, cheerful, and commanding man who keeps the group moving and entertained. Other minor pilgrims include the Manciple, who is cleverer than his employers; the Cook, who has a weeping sore on his shin; the Shipman, who is a rough, experienced sailor; and the Doctor of Physic, who loves gold more than healing. Each **character description**, no matter how brief, adds to the rich tapestry of the pilgrimage.

Why These Character Descriptions Matter

The **Canterbury Tales character description** is not just a collection of portraits; it is a social commentary. Chaucer uses clothing, speech, and physical details to reveal the moral and spiritual state of his characters. The pilgrims represent every level of medieval society, from the noble Knight to the poor Plowman, and each one is drawn with a mixture of realism, humor, and moral insight. Chaucer does not preach; he shows. His **character descriptions**are so vivid that readers can still recognize these types in the world today: the hypocritical religious figure, the worldly merchant, the boastful athlete, the romantic youth, and the wise, humble soul.

Conclusion

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer created a gallery of characters that remains unmatched in English literature for its variety, depth, and humanity. The **Canterbury Tales character description** in the General Prologue gives readers a window into the medieval world while also offering timeless insights into human nature. From the noble Knight to the corrupt Pardoner, from the worldly Wife of Bath to the humble Parson, each pilgrim is a fully realized individual. Studying these **character descriptions**is essential for appreciating Chaucer's artistry and his critique of his society. These pilgrims continue to entertain, instruct, and provoke thought, proving that great literature transcends its time.

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