

# WORLDVIEW GUIDE

## THE CANTERBURY TALES



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## INTRODUCTION

Spring has arrived, prompting folks from all stations of medieval life to pilgrimage together to the shrine of Thomas Becket. Because long trips tend to be rather dull, the travelers begin a storytelling competition featuring roosters, murders, bewitched hags, banished wives in barrels, plenty of adulterers, a whole host of churchmen, and a frying pan whisked to hell. Who will tell the best story on the way? That is for the host, Harry Bailey, to decide.





## WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* seem structurally simple: a long train of stories told by a range of pilgrims. The connections between the tales, however, feel far more elusive. Even Boccaccio, Chaucer's Italian literary contemporary brought the worldview of his own frame narrative more easily to the surface. Boccaccio sets his *Decameron* in the middle of the Black Death's rapid spread throughout the Italian peninsula. The ten companions decide to escape from the plague to the countryside and spend their days with nothing better to do but "eat, drink, and be merry"—telling tales to pass the time while they wait for the plague to pass over or to infect them too. For Boccaccio, stories are the best antidotes to disease as they offer diversion while putting the present tragic circumstances in the larger context of the human drama. For Chaucer, however, the narrative plot thread seems no stronger than a smattering

of spontaneous vignettes motivated by competition and boredom on the road.

The breath of the characters also complicates the teasing out of Chaucer's worldview; Chaucer can hide himself by speaking in so many voices and from many vantages. Can such a frame narrative have any sort of worldview integrity, or must such a work's worldview be simply defined as the aggregate of the thirty travelers' worldviews?

Some critics have argued that Chaucer's goal was merely to give us a survey of "all walks of life" in Medieval England in the late 1300s. From the list of pilgrims, we see the Knight and his son, the Squire, representing the landed class. Chaucer also gives us a long list of churchmen and women including the Friar, the Monk, the Prioress, the Nun's Priest, the Summoner, the Pardoner, and the Parson, as well as a gaggle of lay folk and laborers like the Miller, the Reeve, and the Plowman, among many others. These three social groupings give us the three estates common to Medieval England. Some have suggested that rather than merely present how the three estates interacted in his day and age, Chaucer sought to comment upon the social setup of Medieval England by creating an "estate satire," one that mocked certain absurdities in all classes by having members of each estate tell tales responding to others from other classes. Chaucer also introduces members that don't fit nicely into the three estates—members of what appears to be the future middle class: the Man of Law, the Merchant, the land-owning Franklin,