

Shepard Academy

English 10H

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

“The Prologue” Comprehension and Literary Analysis

**Comprehension**

**1. Recall** When and where does “The Prologue” take place?

**2. Recall** What event or circumstance causes the characters to gather?

**3. Summarize** What plan does the Host propose to the characters?

**Literary Analysis**

**4. Plot Stucture** Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is one of the most famous frame stories. Explain the concept of a frame story and how *The Canterbury Tales* fits this structure.

**5. Analyze Characterization** Throughout the selection, Chaucer uses physical details—eyes, hair, clothing—to help develop his **characters.** How does your pilgrim’s outward appearance reflect his or her personality? Choose another pilgrim whose outward appearance reflects his or her personality.

**6. Identify Irony** Much of the humor of “The Prologue” is based on irony, the discrepancy between what appears to be true and what actually is true. Explain the irony in each of the following character portraits:

• the Nun Prioress -

• the Merchant -

• the Skipper -

• the Doctor -

**7. Draw Conclusions** Review the **annotations and paraphrases** you created as you read the Prologue. What do these passages reveal about the narrator? Describe his personality and values.

**8. Examine Satire** When a writer pokes fun at behaviors and customs with the intent of improving society, he or she is creating satire. Review the descriptions of the Monk and the Friar in lines 169–279. What aspects of the medieval church does Chaucer satirize through these characters?

A ***Monk*** there was, one of the finest sort

Who rode the country; hunting was his sport.

A manly man, to be an Abbot able;

Many a dainty horse he had in stable.

His bridle, when he rode, a man might hear

Jingling in a whistling wind as clear,

Aye, and as loud as does the chapel bell

Where my lord Monk was Prior of the cell.

The Rule of good St. Benet or St. Maur

As old and strict he tended to ignore;

He let go by the things of yesterday

And took the modern world’s more spacious way.

He did not rate that text at a plucked hen

Which says that hunters are not holy men

And that a monk uncloistered is a mere

Fish out of water, flapping on the pier,

That is to say a monk out of his cloister.

That was a text he held not worth an oyster;

And I agreed and said his views were sound;

Was he to study till his head went round

Poring over books in cloisters? Must he toil

As Austin bade and till the very soil?

Was he to leave the world upon the shelf?

Let Austin have his labor to himself.

This Monk was therefore a good man to horse;

Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.

Hunting a hare or riding at a fence

.

Was all his fun, he spared for no expense.

I saw his sleeves were garnished at the hand

With fine grey fur, the finest in the land,

And on his hood, to fasten it at his chin

He had a wrought-gold cunningly fashioned pin;

Into a lover’s knot it seemed to pass.

His head was bald and shone like looking-glass;

So did his face, as if it had been greased.

He was a fat and personablepriest;

His prominent eyeballs never seemed to settle.

They glittered like the flames beneath a kettle;

Supple his boots, his horse in fine condition.

He was a prelate fit for exhibition,

He was not pale like a tormented soul.

He liked a fat swan best, and roasted whole.

His palfrey was as brown as is a berry.

There was a ***Friar,***a wanton one and merry,

A Limiter, a very festive fellow.

In all Four Orders there was none so mellow,

So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned speech.

He’d fixed up many a marriage, giving each

Of his young women what he could afford her.

He was a noble pillar to his Order.

Highly beloved and intimate was he

With County folk within his boundary,

And city dames of honor and possessions;

For he was qualified to hear confessions,

Or so he said, with more than priestly scope;

He had a special license from the Pope.

Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift

With pleasant absolution, for a gift.

He was an easy man in penance-giving

Where he could hope to make a decent living;

It’s a sure sign whenever gifts are given

To a poor Order that a man’s well shriven,

And should he give enough he knew in verity

The penitent repented in sincerity.

For many a fellow is so hard of heart

He cannot weep, for all his inward smart.

Therefore instead of weeping and of prayer

One should give silver for a poor Friar’s care.

He kept his tippet stuffed with pins for curls,

And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.

And certainly his voice was gay and sturdy,

For he sang well and played the hurdy-gurdy.

At sing-songs he was champion of the hour.

His neck was whiter than a lily-flower

But strong enough to butt a bruiser down.

He knew the taverns well in every town

And every innkeeper and barmaid too

Better than lepers, beggars and that crew,

For in so *eminent* a man as he

It was not fitting with the dignity

Of his position, dealing with a scum

Of wretched lepers; nothing good can come

Of commerce with such slum-and-gutter dwellers,

But only with the rich and victual-sellers.

But anywhere a profit might *accrue*

Courteous he was and lowly of service too.

Natural gifts like his were hard to match.

He was the finest beggar of his batch,

And, for his begging-district, paid a rent;

His brethren did no poaching where he went.

For though a widow mightn’t have a shoe,

So pleasant was his holy how-d’ye-do

He got his farthing from her just the same

Before he left, and so his income came

To more than he laid out. And how he romped,

Just like a puppy! He was ever prompt

To arbitrate disputes on settling days

(For a small fee) in many helpful ways,

Not then appearing as your cloistered scholar

With threadbare habit hardly worth a dollar,

**9. Interpret Tone** In literature, tone refers to the attitude a writer takes toward a subject or character. Tone can be serious, playful, admiring, mocking, or objective. Review lines 455–486. What is Chaucer’s tone toward the Wife of Bath? Cite specific words and phrases to support your answer.

A worthy *woman* from beside *Bath* city

Was with us, somewhat deaf, which was a pity.

In making cloth she showed so great a bent

She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent.

In all the parish not a dame dared stir

Towards the altar steps in front of her,

And if indeed they did, so wrath was she

As to be quite put out of charity.

Her kerchiefs were of finely woven ground;

I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound,

The ones she wore on Sunday, on her head.

Her hose were of the finest scarlet red

And gartered tight; her shoes were soft and new.

Bold was her face, handsome, and red in hue.

A worthy woman all her life, what’s more

She’d had five husbands, all at the church door,

Apart from other company in youth;

No need just now to speak of that, forsooth.

And she had thrice been to Jerusalem,

Seen many strange rivers and passed over them;

She’d been to Rome and also to Boulogne,

St. James of Compostella and Cologne,

And she was skilled in wandering by the way.

She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say.

Easily on an ambling horse she sat

Well wimpled up, and on her head a hat

As broad as is a buckler or a shield;

She had a flowing mantle that concealed

Large hips, her heels spurred sharply under that.

In company she liked to laugh and chat

And knew the remedies for love’s mischances,

An art in which she knew the oldest dances.

**10. Make Judgments** Which characters do you believe Chaucer most admires? What makes you think so? Describe the character traits**,** or consistent qualities, these individuals possess. Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.