

The Canterbury Tales Character Chart

The Knight



Social Status: Ruling class: **highest among the pilgrims**

Dress: **“he possessed fine horses but was not gaily dressed”
wore a dark, Fustian tunic (coarse cloth) that had armor stains**

Physical Characteristics: **He is strong because he has endured many battles
He is middle aged because he has a 20 year old son, the squire**

Personality Traits: **wise, modest, distinguished, chivalrous, truthful, honorable,
generous, courteous, brave loves action and adventure, believes in the ideals of chivalry, he must be an excellent
fighter to have survived so many battles all over Europe**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To give thanks to God “to do his pilgrimage and render thanks”
Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? Yes, “ever honored for his
noble graces”**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **None- he is the ideal of chivalry, honor, and bravery –
“the sovereign value in all eyes” “a true, perfect, gentle knight”**

The Squire



Social Status: Ruling class: **the son of the knight**

Dress: **“embroidered like a meadow bright, etc. (dressed in red and white)
His gown was short, sleeves long and wide**

Physical Characteristics: **curly hair, about 20 years old, average height, strong
Physically fit, sings and plays the flute, likes poetry, jousting, horse riding, dancing,**

Personality Traits: **he fought on behalf of a lady and did well quickly, lover,
respectful to his father, hard working and willing to take risks**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **Maybe out of respect for this father**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **yes**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **none**

The Yeoman



Social Status: **peasant class, servant who accompanies the knight and squire**

Dress: **coat and hood of green with peacock-feather arrows at his belt, held a bow
sword and dagger – also a hunting horn**

**Wore saucy bracelet as shield guard from the bow and sword along with
St. Christopher’s medal**

Physical Characteristics: **head like a nut and brown faced, strong
Knew the whole of woodcraft up and down**

Personality **The artist rendition on page 100 suggests the yeoman is ready for any
occurrence in the forest, such as hunting game or defense against highwayman attack. He looks sturdy and serious
and like Robin Hood.**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **He is accompanying the knight and squire**
Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? Yes, **“He was a proper forester, I guess.”**
What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **None suggested**

The Prioress



Social Status: **clergy (wealthy) – she is a nun**
Dress: **veil, graceful cloak, jewelry (prayer bracelet) that indicates wealth and worldiness**
Physical Characteristics: **not undergrown, elegant nose, gray eyes, small, red mouth, wide forehead,**
Personality Traits: **Simple and coy (shy), neat, clean, clingy, helpless Charitable, sympathetic, sentimental, tender-hearted (too much so)**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **She is a nun so a spiritual trip seems likely**
Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **“He suggests that her daintiness is too extreme (“her upper lip so clean” being reduced to tears when seeing a mouse in a trap...)”**
What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **She is too delicate**

The Monk



Social Status: **clergy (wealthy)**
Dress: **wealthy, fine fur-trimmed robe, gold brooch**
Physical Characteristics: **bald, fat**
Personality Traits: **Hunter has greyhounds, and hunting shoes with spurs, personable he likes to eat**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **He is a priest but his mission is probably more self indulgent than spiritual**
Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **His wealthy clothes do not match his humble vocation.**
What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **Instead of devoting his life to work and prayer like most monks of the Middle Ages, he spends his time hunting and eating.**

The Friar



Social Status: **clergy (wealthy)**
Dress: **had a long hanging hood, white, thick neck, rich cape like a Pope**
Physical Characteristics: **He sang well and played the hurdy-gurdy stringed instrument and the harp**
Personality Traits: **“Glib with gallant phrase and well turned speech” (He is very**

Persuasive at talking women and wealthy landowners into giving him money in exchange for listening to confessions “an easy man in penance giving”

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **He is a priest but his intentions are dishonest – to make money off selling blessings**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **No, Chaucer is criticizing the Friar and religious figures like him who are unscrupulous and take advantage of their religious position**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **Instead of remaining tied to one monastery, this friar goes from one wealthy landowner to another accepting bribes in exchange for absolution.**

The Merchant



Social Status: **part of a wealthy trade class of fur traders and cloth**

Dress: **motley (multi color) dress , wore Flemish beaver hat, daintily buckled boots**

Physical Characteristics: **forking beard, stately, noble in appearance “high on his horse he sat”**

Personality Traits: **Expert at currency exchange but personally in debt**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **Perhaps he hopes to sell some of his furs and cloths**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **He doesn't even know his name.**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **He is supposedly part of the wealthy class but he is actually in debt.**

The Oxford Cleric



Social Status: **Middle Class Student of Philosophy**

Dress: **“Thread on his overcoat was bare” his clothes are rags**

Physical Characteristics: **Slender, hollow look, a sober stare (serious)**

Personality Traits: **Studious, read a lot, spent all his money on books, not social**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **He seeks morality and virtue... “The thought of moral virtue filled his speech”**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **Maybe Chaucer is just trying to say that studious types retreated from society**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **Whatever money he gets from friends, he spends on books, and he doesn't have a job, but he might become a teacher.**

The Man of Law



Social Status: **Middle class lawyer appointed by the King**

Dress: **Homely parti-colored coat, pin striped belt**

Physical Characteristics: **Not stated – see personality traits**

Personality Traits: **Wise, cautious, accurate, knowledgeable in all laws**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To uphold justice**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **Yes, everybody respected him “ a man of reverence”**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **None suggested**

The Franklin



Social Status: **middle class - man of leisure**

Dress: **had a dagger and white purse**

Physical Characteristics: **White beard,**

Personality Traits: **Confident, cheerful, lived for pleasure**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To enjoy himself**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **He liked good food, good wine. He kept a buffet of food ready to eat all day.**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **He was lucky and didn't serve a nobleman, so he was a free man.**

The Tradesmen

(Carpetmaker, Haberdasher
Dyer, Carpenter, Weaver)

Social Status: **Trade class – group who appear as a unit**

Dress: **Stylishly dressed Their gear was trim and fresh, knives wrought with purest silver**

Physical Characteristics: **Proud men who represented their guild (their group of craftsmen – they are the new emerging middle class**

Personality Traits: **Seemed like worthy members of a legislative body**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To represent their group of upcoming craftsmen**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **They are the new middle class**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **Their wives are eager for their husbands to run for office so they can move up the social ladder.**

The Cook



Social Status: trade class cook

Dress: unknown

Physical Characteristics: sore on leg

Personality Traits: servant to craftsmen, good cook, good sense of taste

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To cook for the group of upcoming craftsmen**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **He feels sorry for him**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **Has a sore on his leg**

The Skipper/Shipman



Social Status: **peasant class - a veteran sailor**

Dress: Woolen **gown that reach his knee, dagger hanging from his neck**

Physical Characteristics: **Tan, bearded**

Personality Traits: **A rascal who he steals wine, he is hardy, he is a skilled navigator but ruthless with enemies, able to withstand hardship, careful planner**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **He is well traveled, so he perhaps he wants to continue his travels...**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **See below**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **He steals wine**

The Doctor



Social Status: **Middle Class**

Dress: **Blood-red garments slashed with bluish-gray, lone with taffeta (silk)**

Physical Characteristics: **see personality traits**

Personality Traits: **Well spoken, excellent knowledge of middle ages medical tricks And remedies based more on medieval practices like blood-letting Well connected to local apothecaries who profited like the doctor**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **Maybe to make money in case someone gets sick**
Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **“He did not read the Bible very much.” Although physically healthy, the doctor is unhealthy in spirit.**
What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **He seemed to be more interested in profiting from people’s illnesses than helping people get better.**

The Wife of Bath



Social Status: middle class seamstress

Dress: **kerchiefs finely woven, red hose, new shoes**

Physical Characteristics: **somewhat deaf, red faced but handsome, gapped teeth, large hips**

Personality Traits: **bold, argumentative, well traveled, professional wife**
Very social

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **Maybe to meet another husband.**
Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **“”a worthy woman”**
What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **She was married five times**

The Parson

Social Status: **Clergy**

Dress: **modest/poor**

Physical Characteristics: **see personality**

Personality Traits: **Holy, virtuous, hard working church man who disliked extorting tithe (taxes paid to church), gave from the church offerings to the poor, he practices what he preaches**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To help others find salvation.**
Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **The Parson lives in poverty but is rich in holy thoughts and deeds.**
What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **None, unlike the monk, friar, and pardoner, he is the only the devout churchman.**

The Plowman

Social Status: **peasant, the parson’s good-hearted brother**

Dress: **Wore a loose jacket smock, rode a mare**

Physical Characteristics: **see above and below**

Personality Traits: **Honest worker, good and true, loves God and neighbors, helpful to the poor, pays tithes to the church**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To accompany his brother, the parson, to praise God**
Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **Yes, he is a giver.**
What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **None lives a good Christian life.**

The Miller



Social Status: **trade class worker who uses equipment to make flour**

Dress: **Sword and buckler (shield) at his side, wore a blue hood and white coat**

Physical Characteristics: **Stout - weighed 224 pounds, big, brawny red beard, wart on his nose**

Personality Traits: **Wrestler, steals grain, a loud, bad storytelling clown, plays bagpipes**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To go against conventional thinking**
Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **No, he is a brute**
What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **He is a big mouth and blasphemous.**

The Manciple



Social Status: Trade Class – **provider of provisions for a college or court or monastery**

Dress: **clothing suitable for a trade class that buys supplies for elite groups**

Physical Characteristics: **see below**

Personality Traits: **Uneducated but clever, smarter than those he feeds**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **He serves food to monasteries so perhaps he wants to serve himself with salvation**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **Yes, he is smarter than the elite group he buys food and supplies for**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **none**

The Reeve



Social Status: **Middle class steward responsible for running the everyday affairs of a feudal manor**

Dress: **long overcoat of bluish gray, rusty blade**

Physical Characteristics: **Old, thin, close shaven, legs like sticks, probably frail**

Personality Traits: **Feared like the plague by serfs and herdsmen - those beneath him, Knowledgeable in his job**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **Perhaps he seeks forgiveness for stealing from his master and creating fear in those who worked for him.**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **Probably not since he was cruel and a thief – he rode in the back of the cavalcade**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **He grew rich by knowing his job well and stealing from his master**

The Summoner

Social Status: **clergy - An official who brings persons accused of violating Church law to court**

Dress: **He wore a garland on his head - see drawing on page 113**

Physical Characteristics: **Has leprosy - disgusting red baby face with pus-filled pimples, narrow eyes, black scabby brows and thin beard**

Personality Traits: **He is a drunk, lecherous, ill-tempered, smelled of garlic and onions**



What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **Maybe to drink and chase women**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **No, he is not good at his job and takes advantage of his position pretending to know Latin but really only knows a few words**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **He drinks too much and is a lecher (womanizer)**

The Pardoner

Social Status: **clergy - pardons people's sins for a donation to the church**

Dress: **Carries a bag full of fake religious relics, no hood but a little cap on head Bulging eyeballs, has cross on his wallet, pilgrim medal on hat**

Physical Characteristics: **long, greasy yellow hair, beardless**

Personality Traits: **Greedy fraud, shifty, keeps money from blessings to himself, Sneaky, untrustworthy, dishonest, he read and sang sermons well**



What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To make money in exchange for forgiving pilgrims for their sins**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **No, he is a charlatan (fake)**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **He rides with the summoner who also takes advantage of his position; the cross on his wallet symbolizes how he uses the church to line his pockets**

The Host
(Harry Bailey)



Social Status: **trade class - the leader of the group**

Dress: **see below**

Physical Characteristics: **large, striking in appearance, manly, bright eyed**

Personality Traits: **Loud and merry but quick tempered, bold, tactful,
Generous, curious**

What is his/her reason in going on this pilgrimage? **To accompany the pilgrims on their journey and select the one who tells the best story who will be rewarded with a free supper**

Does Chaucer approve of this character, or does he indicate that he had failed his faith? **Yes**

What faults might this character have according to Chaucer? **none**

Characters

The Pilgrims

The Narrator

A character called Geoffrey Chaucer. We should be wary of accepting his words and opinions as Chaucer's own. In the General Prologue, the narrator presents himself as a gregarious and naïve character. Later on, the Host accuses him of being silent and sullen. The narrator writes down his impressions of the pilgrims from memory. What he chooses to remember about the characters tells us as much about the narrator's own prejudices as it does about the characters themselves.

The Knight

The first pilgrim Chaucer describes in the General Prologue and the teller of the first tale. The Knight represents the ideal of a medieval Christian man-at-arms. He has participated in no less than 15 of the great crusades of his era. Brave, experienced, and prudent, the narrator greatly admires him.

The Wife of Bath

A seamstress by occupation and an "expert on marriage." The Wife of Bath has been married five times and had many other affairs in her youth, making her well practiced in the art of love. She presents herself as someone who loves marriage and sex, but, from what we see of her, she also takes pleasure in rich attire, talking, and arguing. She is deaf in one ear and has a gap between her

front teeth, which was considered attractive in Chaucer's time. She has traveled on pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times and elsewhere in Europe as well. Bath is an English town on the Avon River, not the name of this woman's husband.

The Pardoner

A charlatan, who "officially" forgives people's sins for a price. Pardoners granted papal indulgences—reprieves from penance in exchange for charitable donations to the Church. Many pardoners, including this one, collected profits for themselves. Chaucer's Pardoner excels in fraud, carrying a bag full of fake relics. For example, he claims to have the veil of the Virgin Mary. The Pardoner has long, greasy, yellow hair and is beardless. These characteristics were associated with shiftiness and gender ambiguity in Chaucer's time. The Pardoner also has a gift for singing and preaching whenever he finds himself inside a church.

The Miller

Stout and brawny, with a wart on his nose and a big mouth, both literally and figuratively. He threatens the Host's notion of propriety when he drunkenly insists on telling the second tale. Indeed, the Miller seems to enjoy overturning all conventions: He ruins the Host's carefully planned storytelling order, he rips doors off hinges, and he tells a tale that is somewhat blasphemous, ridiculing religious and scholarly clerks, carpenters, and women.

The Prioress

A nun who heads a convent. Described as modest and quiet, this Prioress aspires to have exquisite taste. Her table manners are dainty, she knows French (though not the French of the court), she dresses well, and she is charitable and compassionate.

The Monk

A monk given to corporeal pleasures. Most monks of the Middle Ages lived in monasteries according to the Rule of Saint Benedict, which demanded that they devote their lives to "work and prayer." This Monk cares little for the Rule; his devotion is to hunting and eating. He is large, loud, and well clad in hunting boots and furs.

The Friar

An example of the unscrupulous friars of Chaucer's time. Roaming priests with no ties to a monastery, friars were great objects of criticism in Chaucer's time. Always ready to befriend young women or rich men who might need his services, the friar actively administers the sacraments in his town, especially those of marriage and confession. However, Chaucer's worldly Friar has taken to accepting bribes.

The Summoner

An official who brings persons accused of violating Church law to ecclesiastical court. This Summoner is a lecherous man whose face is scarred by leprosy. He gets drunk frequently, is irritable, and is not particularly qualified for his position. He spouts the few words of Latin he knows in an attempt to sound educated.

The Host

The leader of the group. The Host is large, loud, and merry, though he possesses a quick temper. He mediates and facilitates the flow of the pilgrims' tales. His title of "host" may be a pun, suggesting both an innkeeper and the Eucharist, or Holy Host.

The Parson

The only devout churchman in the company. The Parson lives in poverty but is rich in holy thoughts and deeds. The pastor of a sizable town, he preaches the Gospel and makes sure to practice what he preaches. He's everything that the Monk, Friar, and Pardoner aren't.

The Pardoner

The Pardoner rides in the very back of the party in the General Prologue and is fittingly the most marginalized character in the company. His profession is somewhat dubious—pardoners offered indulgences, or previously written pardons for particular sins, to people who repented of the sin they had committed. Along with receiving the indulgence, the penitent would make a donation to the Church by giving money to the pardoner. Eventually, this “charitable” donation became a necessary part of receiving an indulgence. Paid by the Church to offer these indulgences, the Pardoner was not supposed to pocket the penitents’ charitable donations. That said, the practice of offering indulgences came under critique by quite a few churchmen, since once the charitable donation became a practice allied to receiving an indulgence, it began to look like one could cleanse oneself of sin by simply paying off the Church. Additionally, widespread suspicion held that pardoners counterfeited the pope’s signature on illegitimate indulgences and pocketed the “charitable donations” themselves.

Chaucer’s Pardoner is a highly untrustworthy character. He sings a ballad—“Com hider, love, to me!” (General Prologue, 672)—with the hypocritical Summoner, undermining the already challenged virtue of his profession as one who works for the Church. He presents himself as someone of ambiguous gender and sexual orientation, further challenging social norms. The narrator is not sure whether the Pardoner is an effeminate homosexual or a eunuch (castrated male). Like the other pilgrims, the Pardoner carries with him to Canterbury the tools of his trade—in his case, freshly signed papal indulgences and a sack of false relics, including a brass cross filled with stones to make it seem as heavy as gold and a glass jar full of pig’s bones, which he passes off as saints’ relics. Since visiting relics on pilgrimage had become a tourist industry, the Pardoner wants to cash in on religion in any way he can, and he does this by selling tangible, material objects—whether slips of paper that promise forgiveness of sins or animal bones that people can string around their necks as charms against the devil. After telling the group how he gulls people into indulging his own avarice through a sermon he preaches on greed, the Pardoner tells of a tale that exemplifies the vice decried in his sermon. Furthermore, he attempts to sell pardons to the group—in effect plying his trade in clear violation of the rules outlined by the host.

The Squire

The Knight’s son and apprentice. The Squire is curly-haired, youthfully handsome, and loves dancing and courting.

The Clerk

A poor student of philosophy. Having spent his money on books and learning rather than on fine clothes, the clerk is threadbare and wan. He speaks little, but when he does, his words are wise and full of moral virtue.

The Man of Law

A successful lawyer commissioned by the king. He upholds justice in matters large and small and knows every statute of England’s law by heart.

The Manciple

A clever fellow. A manciple was in charge of getting provisions for a college or court. Despite his lack of education, the Manciple is smarter than the 30 lawyers he feeds.

The Merchant

A trader in furs and cloth, mostly from Flanders. The merchant is part of a powerful and wealthy class in Chaucer’s society.

The Shipman

A well-traveled and well-tanned veteran sailor. The Shipman has seen every bay and river in England, as well as exotic ports in Spain and Carthage. He is a bit of a rascal, known for stealing wine while the ship’s captain sleeps.

The Physician

A talented doctor with expertise in diagnosing the causes and finding cures for most maladies. Though the Physician keeps himself in perfect physical health, the narrator calls into question the Physician's spiritual health: He rarely consults the Bible and has an unhealthy love of financial gain.

The Franklin

A man of leisure. The word *franklin* means "free man." In Chaucer's society, a franklin was neither a vassal serving a lord nor a member of the nobility. This particular franklin is a connoisseur of food and wine—so much so that his table remains laid and ready for food all day.

The Reeve

A shrewd steward of a manor. This reeve's lord never loses so much as a ram to the other employees, and the vassals under his command are kept in line. However, he steals from his master.

The Plowman

The Parson's brother and an equally good-hearted man. A member of the peasant class, he pays his tithes to the Church and leads a good Christian life.

The Guildsmen

A hatmaker, carpenter, weaver, clothing dyer, and a tapestry maker. The Guildsmen appear as a unit. English guilds were a combination of labor unions and social fraternities: Craftsmen of similar occupations joined together to increase their bargaining power and live communally. All five Guildsmen are clad in the livery of their brotherhood.

The Cook

The Guildsmen's cook. The Narrator gives little detail about him, but he does mention a crusty sore on the Cook's leg.

The Yeoman

The servant who accompanies the Knight and the Squire. The Narrator mentions that the Yeoman's dress and weapons suggest he may be a forester.

The Second Nun

Not described in the General Prologue. She tells a saint's life for her tale.

The Nun's Priest

Also not described in the General Prologue. His story of Chanticleer, however, is well crafted and suggests that he is a witty, self-effacing preacher.

- Ruling Class: knight, squire
- Clergy: monk, friar, prioress, parson summoner, pardoner
- Middle Class: Franklin, Reeve, doctor, oxford student, wife of Bath, sergeant at law
- Trade Class: guildsmen, cook, miller, host, manciple, merchant.
- Peasants: skipper, plowman, yeoman