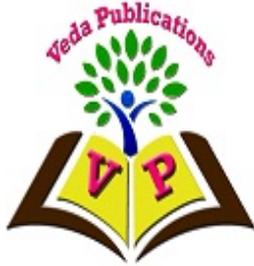




## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**VOICES ON THE ROAD: PILGRIMAGE AND STORYTELLING IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES***

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This article explores the intricate relationship between pilgrimage and storytelling in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, focusing on how the narrative framework of the journey to Canterbury enables a rich polyphony of voices. The pilgrimage is not merely a religious or physical journey but a narrative device that brings together a socially diverse group of pilgrims, each contributing unique perspectives through their tales. By examining the interplay between the tellers and their stories, the article highlights how Chaucer uses storytelling as a means of social commentary, character development, and literary experimentation. The road becomes a liminal space where identities are negotiated, hierarchies are questioned, and narrative authority is constantly in flux. Drawing on theories of narrative voice and performativity, this study underscores Chaucer's innovation in creating a dynamic textual space where storytelling is both a personal expression and a communal act.

**Keywords:** *Chaucer, Pilgrimage, Storytelling, The Canterbury Tales*



## INTRODUCTION

### Background: *The Canterbury Tales* in 14th-Century England

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* was written during a period of profound social, religious, and political transformation in 14th-century England. The century was marked by events that deeply influenced the national consciousness, including the Black Death (1348–1350), which drastically reduced the population, disrupted the feudal economy, and contributed to social mobility and unrest. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 further reflected growing tensions between the lower classes and ruling elites, challenging long-standing feudal hierarchies.

Religion played a central role in daily life, with the Catholic Church exerting immense spiritual, political, and economic influence. Pilgrimage was a widespread religious practice, seen as a means of penance, devotion, or healing. However, critiques of clerical corruption were becoming increasingly common, foreshadowing later movements like Lollardy and the Reformation. Chaucer embeds these tensions in his text, presenting a spectrum of characters from devout to hypocritical whose stories reflect the complexities of their time.

Socially, the structure of medieval England was hierarchical, dominated by the aristocracy, clergy, and an emerging middle class. *The Canterbury Tales* brings together characters from across this social spectrum like knights, merchants, clerics, peasants offering a rare literary portrayal of diverse voices. Chaucer's work is both a product of its time and a subtle critique of it, using the pilgrimage and

storytelling framework to examine moral, social, and spiritual concerns in a rapidly changing world.

### Chaucer's Innovation in Narrative Form

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* represents a significant innovation in medieval English literature, particularly in its use of narrative form. Departing from the monologic and often didactic structure typical of earlier medieval works, Chaucer creates a complex, frame narrative that allows for multiple, distinct voices to emerge. The overarching story of a group of pilgrims journeying to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury serves as a narrative scaffold within which a wide variety of tales are told. Each pilgrim narrates a story, and these tales reflect their individual personalities, social status, and worldviews, creating a polyphonic text that anticipates later developments in the novel form.

Chaucer also introduces a sophisticated interplay between narrators and narratives. The tales are not isolated; they often respond to one another, challenge earlier tellers, or reveal contradictions between the teller's character and the tale's content. This layering of narrative voices and perspectives adds realism, irony, and depth. Moreover, Chaucer's decision to write in Middle English, rather than Latin or French, was itself ground-breaking, helping to elevate the vernacular as a legitimate medium for literary expression.

By blending poetic form with diverse narrative voices, social commentary, and dramatic interludes among the pilgrims, Chaucer transforms a traditional pilgrimage into a dynamic literary experiment. *The Canterbury Tales* thus stands as a foundational text in



English literature, bridging medieval genres with modern narrative techniques.

### **PILGRIMAGE AS BOTH PHYSICAL AND METAPHORICAL JOURNEY**

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer presents pilgrimage not merely as a religious or physical undertaking but as a rich metaphorical journey that reflects the inner lives, moral struggles, and social dynamics of the pilgrims. On the surface, the narrative follows a group of people traveling to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury, a common act of devotion in 14th-century England. This physical journey provides the narrative frame, giving Chaucer the opportunity to assemble a socially diverse group of pilgrims and set the stage for the storytelling contest.

However, the pilgrimage also functions as a metaphorical journey, representing a deeper exploration of human character, morality, and the complexities of society. Each tale told along the road becomes a reflection of the teller's values, desires, and worldview, often revealing more about the individual than the narrative itself intends. The journey thus becomes a space for self-revelation and social critique, where class tensions, gender dynamics, and religious hypocrisy are exposed.

Furthermore, the metaphorical nature of the pilgrimage is emphasized by its incompleteness. The pilgrims never reach Canterbury within the text, and the final tale, i.e. the Parson's offers a sermon on penitence that suggests a spiritual culmination, even as the physical destination remains unrealized. This open-ended structure reinforces the idea that the true pilgrimage is inward: a journey toward

understanding, self-awareness, or redemption, however imperfect or ironic that quest may be.

By framing *The Canterbury Tales* within both a literal and symbolic journey, Chaucer transforms the pilgrimage into a literary device that accommodates satire, reflection, and a multiplicity of voices each on their own path toward truth, or at least, toward expression.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING**

Storytelling is central to the structure, purpose, and meaning of *The Canterbury Tales*. Far more than a narrative device, it serves as a tool for character development, social critique, and literary experimentation. Chaucer frames his entire text around a storytelling contest proposed by the Host, in which each pilgrim is to tell tales during the journey to Canterbury. This premise allows Chaucer to showcase a wide range of genres, voices, and moral perspectives, transforming the act of storytelling into a dynamic reflection of 14th-century English society.

Through storytelling, pilgrims reveal their individual personalities, biases, and values. The Knight tells a noble romance reflecting his chivalric ideals, while the Miller offers a bawdy, subversive fabliau that challenges social hierarchies and decorum. The Wife of Bath uses her tale and the prologue especially as a platform to challenge gender norms and assert her authority. In this way, storytelling becomes a form of self-expression, often blurring the line between narrator and narrative.

Moreover, storytelling enables dialogue and conflict among pilgrims. Tales are not presented in isolation; they respond to, interrupt, and critique one



another. This narrative interplay reflects broader tensions of class, gender, and religion, highlighting the diversity and division within medieval society. Storytelling thus becomes a space for debate and negotiation, as pilgrims use their tales to assert power, defend reputations, or mock their fellow travellers.

Chaucer also uses storytelling to explore the nature of truth, fiction, and authorship. Some tales are morally didactic, others deeply ironic or satirical. Chaucer the narrator even presents himself as a character, distancing the author from the text and raising questions about narrative reliability. In doing so, Chaucer foregrounds storytelling as an art form, drawing attention to the constructedness of narratives and the intentions behind them.

Ultimately, storytelling in *The Canterbury Tales* is not only a means of entertainment during a journey, it is the very substance of the journey. It binds the pilgrims together, exposes their differences, and offers Chaucer a powerful medium through which to engage with the complexities of human nature and medieval life.

#### **PILGRIMAGE AS NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK**

##### **Pilgrimage as a Medieval Cultural and Spiritual Practice**

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer employs the medieval tradition of pilgrimage as the overarching narrative framework, grounding his work in a cultural practice that was both widely understood and deeply symbolic in 14th-century England. Pilgrimage, in the medieval context, was a religious journey to a sacred site, often undertaken for penance, healing, spiritual merit, or devotion.

Popular destinations included Canterbury, Santiago de Compostela, and Rome, with the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury holding particular national significance for English pilgrims.

Chaucer draws on this cultural backdrop to frame his collection of tales, beginning with a group of pilgrims gathering at the Tabard Inn before embarking on their journey to Canterbury. By doing so, he roots the text in a recognizable religious and social ritual, allowing readers to understand the pilgrimage not only as a physical journey but also as a spiritually symbolic one. The act of pilgrimage was associated with moral testing, reflection, and transformation, i.e., elements that Chaucer cleverly mirrors through the unfolding of each pilgrim's tale.

However, Chaucer subverts expectations by using this sacred framework to introduce a wide variety of secular, comic, and even profane stories. Rather than focusing exclusively on spiritual narratives, the tales span genres including romance, fabliau, beast fable, and sermon, reflecting the diversity of the pilgrims themselves. In this way, the pilgrimage serves as a structural and thematic device: it provides cohesion to the text while also allowing for fragmentation and variety, as each tale is shaped by the teller's social status, worldview, and personal motives.

Moreover, the road to Canterbury becomes a liminal space - a space between the everyday world and the sacred destination where normal social rules can be bent or contested. The storytelling contest proposed by the Host transforms the pilgrimage into a stage for social interaction, tension, and performance, allowing Chaucer to explore the complex interplay of voice, authority, and identity.



Thus, Chaucer's use of pilgrimage as a narrative framework draws directly from medieval religious practice, but reimagines it in literary terms, creating a structure that is both rooted in cultural tradition and uniquely flexible. It becomes the perfect vehicle for a text that is at once communal and individual, sacred and profane, orderly and chaotic.

### The General Prologue: Setting Up the Frame Narrative

The **General Prologue** to *The Canterbury Tales* serves as the foundation of the entire work, establishing the **frame narrative** through which the individual tales are told. Chaucer opens the poem with a lyrical description of **spring time**, a season symbolically associated with renewal, pilgrimage, and spiritual awakening. This sets a fitting backdrop for the journey to the shrine of **Saint Thomas Becket** at Canterbury—a real and significant site of religious pilgrimage in medieval England.

Crucially, the General Prologue introduces the **fictional premise** that a group of twenty-nine pilgrims has gathered at the **Tabard Inn** in Southwark, outside London, before embarking on the journey together. Chaucer the narrator, who presents himself as one of the pilgrims, describes how he meets this diverse group and agrees to join them. It is the **Host**, Harry Bailly, who proposes the storytelling contest: each pilgrim will tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the return, with the best storyteller receiving a free supper upon their return.

**This frame narrative serves several important purposes:**

- **Structural Unity** : It provides a coherent structure for a wide variety of tales by embedding them within a shared context—the pilgrimage and contest.
- **Character Introduction** : The Prologue offers vivid and detailed portraits of each pilgrim, from the noble Knight to the bawdy Miller, allowing readers to understand their personalities, social roles, and potential biases before hearing their tales. These introductions function almost like **dramatis personae**, setting expectations and providing ironic counterpoints to the stories they tell.
- **Social Cross-Section** : Chaucer includes characters from a broad spectrum of medieval society—nobility, clergy, middle class, and peasantry—making the Prologue a kind of **microcosm of 14th-century England**.
- **Narrative Voice and Irony**: The narrator presents the pilgrims with apparent neutrality, often using irony and understatement. This invites readers to look beneath the surface of the descriptions and question the reliability of the narrator, adding complexity to the frame.

Ultimately, the **General Prologue** not only sets the physical journey in motion but also launches the **literary journey** of the text. It establishes the dynamics among the pilgrims, foreshadows the themes and tensions that will arise, and creates a flexible narrative structure in which Chaucer can



experiment with genre, voice, and perspective. In this way, the frame narrative becomes essential to the richness and enduring relevance of *The Canterbury Tales*.

### THE ROAD TO CANTERBURY: A SPACE FOR DIVERSE GROUPS

One of the most significant literary innovations in *The Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's use of the **pilgrimage to Canterbury** as a means of bringing together a socially and morally diverse group of characters. In medieval England, pilgrimage was one of the few contexts in which people of different **social classes, occupations, and regions** could travel and interact with relative equality. Chaucer exploits this cultural reality to construct a narrative space in which a broad cross-section of 14th-century society is represented and heard.

The road to Canterbury becomes a **liminal space**, i.e., neither fully sacred nor entirely secular where everyday hierarchies are temporarily relaxed. Within this setting, a Knight, a Merchant, a Miller, a Prioress, a Plowman, and even a Pardoner share the same physical journey, and more importantly, the same narrative stage. By placing these characters side by side, Chaucer creates opportunities for **dialogue, tension, satire, and social critique**. Their interactions through tale-telling reflect competing worldviews, values, and levels of education and morality.

This gathering of diverse voices also reflects the growing complexity of English society in the late 14th century. The traditional **feudal order** was being challenged by the rise of the **urban middle class**, the aftermath of the **Black Death**, and movements like the **Peasants' Revolt (1381)**. Chaucer mirrors this

fluidity by giving voice to both traditional authorities (such as the Knight and the Parson) and marginal or morally ambiguous figures (such as the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner). Each character brings a unique perspective to the journey, and their tales often reflect or contradict their social roles, revealing the **gaps between appearance and reality**.

By framing the text around a shared pilgrimage, Chaucer constructs a narrative environment that is **democratic in form**, if not in content. Every pilgrim, regardless of rank or virtue, has a chance to speak. The storytelling contest levels the playing field at least temporarily giving Chaucer the flexibility to explore a **plurality of voices**, genres, and ideologies. The road to Canterbury, therefore, is not just a path toward a religious destination; it is a symbolic and literary space where **diverse identities converge**, and where the complexities of medieval life are vividly staged.

### Storytelling as Performance and Contest: The Central Narrative Device

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer uses storytelling not just as a means of entertainment, but as the **central narrative device** through which character, social dynamics, and thematic complexity are revealed. The storytelling contest, proposed by the Host in the **General Prologue**, structures the entire work: each pilgrim is invited to tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the return, with a free meal promised to the best storyteller. Although Chaucer never completes this ambitious plan, the premise allows for a **rich interplay of performance, competition, and commentary**.



The act of storytelling in this context is inherently **performative**. Each pilgrim delivers a tale that reflects not only their social role but their desire to impress, persuade, or outdo others. For example, the Miller drunkenly interrupts the Knight's noble tale with a bawdy fabliau that mocks romantic ideals, directly challenging the social decorum of the storytelling order. Similarly, the Wife of Bath uses both her prologue and tale as a public stage to assert her views on marriage, power, and female agency, performing her identity as much as telling a story.

This performative aspect turns the storytelling into a kind of **social theatre**, where tales are used to express personal grievances, ideological positions, or comic revenge. The Reeve, offended by the Miller's tale, responds with his own story ridiculing a miller. The Pardoner, who openly admits to his own hypocrisy, delivers a morally powerful sermon on greed, demonstrating the irony and complexity of self-presentation in Chaucer's narrative world.

The **contest format** also highlights the **competitive nature of storytelling**. Pilgrims are not just sharing tales; they are trying to **win** whether in terms of humor, moral impact, narrative skill, or social dominance. This competition fuels the dynamic interaction between tales and tellers, as stories often serve as veiled critiques or challenges to previous speakers. The Host, acting as judge and provocateur, further encourages this dynamic, creating moments of tension and conflict that energize the narrative.

Moreover, this structure allows Chaucer to explore a variety of **genres and styles** like romance, fabliau, saint's life, beast fable, sermon, each reflecting the teller's worldview, status, and audience. Storytelling becomes a space for **literary**

**experimentation**, where Chaucer showcases the richness of the English vernacular and the versatility of narrative voice.

In essence, storytelling in *The Canterbury Tales* is not a passive recounting of events, but an **active, performative, and socially charged act**. It is through this lens that Chaucer constructs a vibrant, multi-voiced text in which the boundaries between character, narrator, and author are blurred, and where the act of storytelling itself becomes a central theme. The contest on the road to Canterbury is thus more than a narrative frame, it is the **engine** of the work's dramatic and thematic richness.

#### **PILGRIMAGE AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH OR MEANING**

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrimage functions not only as a physical journey but also as a profound metaphor for the human quest for **truth, meaning, and spiritual fulfillment**. Medieval pilgrimage was traditionally understood as an act of penance and devotion, a way to seek forgiveness, healing, or divine grace. Chaucer's portrayal, however, presents a more complex and often ambiguous picture of this spiritual endeavor.

The pilgrims set out on their journey with the shared goal of reaching the sacred shrine of **Saint Thomas Becket**, a symbol of religious authority and sanctity. Yet, as the tales unfold, it becomes clear that their individual quests for truth are varied and frequently compromised by human folly, hypocrisy, or self-interest. The Pardoner, for example, preaches against greed while openly admitting his own deceit, embodying the tension between spiritual ideals and worldly corruption.



This ambiguity is further highlighted by the **open-endedness of the pilgrimage** itself. The tales conclude before the pilgrims reach Canterbury, symbolizing that the search for meaning is ongoing rather than resolved. The **Parson's Tale**, which functions as a sermon on penitence and moral rectitude, offers a didactic conclusion that points toward genuine spiritual reflection. Yet, the incomplete nature of the journey and the diverse, sometimes contradictory voices suggest that truth is not fixed or singular but elusive and multifaceted.

Chaucer's use of pilgrimage thus mirrors the **complex human experience** of seeking understanding amid doubt, sin, and social complexity. The pilgrimage is a metaphor for life itself, a journey filled with trials, distractions, and moments of insight. Through the interplay of sacred and profane stories, *The Canterbury Tales* invites readers to reflect on the nature of faith, the difficulty of moral discernment, and the power of storytelling to illuminate or obscure truth.

Ultimately, the pilgrimage in Chaucer's work represents a **dynamic space where spiritual aspiration and human imperfection coexist**, reminding us that the search for meaning is both personal and communal, continuous and uncertain.

## CONCLUSION

*The Canterbury Tales* masterfully intertwines the physical act of pilgrimage with the art of storytelling, creating a rich tapestry of voices that reflect the complexities of 14th-century English society. Through the pilgrimage framework, Chaucer brings together a diverse group of pilgrims whose stories reveal the myriad ways individuals seek identity, truth, and meaning. The road to Canterbury becomes more

than a journey to a sacred site—it transforms into a dynamic space where social hierarchies are negotiated, personal narratives intersect, and the human condition is explored through a plurality of perspectives.

Storytelling emerges as both a performative act and a vehicle for social commentary, allowing Chaucer to challenge conventions, expose hypocrisies, and celebrate the diversity of human experience. The pilgrimage's incomplete nature underscores the ongoing, uncertain quest for spiritual and moral understanding, while the tales themselves embody the tensions between sacred ideals and worldly realities.

Ultimately, *The Canterbury Tales* invites readers to listen to the "voices on the road" not just as characters in a medieval narrative, but as participants in a timeless exploration of community, conflict, and the search for meaning. Chaucer's innovative fusion of pilgrimage and storytelling continues to resonate, affirming the enduring power of narrative to bridge divides and illuminate the human journey.

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