The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales
by Geoffrey Chaucer

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The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales

by Geoffrey Chaucer

For the most part, only the light characters travel. Who are you that have no task to keep you at home?

—Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)
If you went on a tour today, what types of people would you meet? Do you think you might come across a “character” or two?

Chaucer’s characters are the kinds of people he would have known in real life and observed riding toward Canterbury on the old pilgrimage road.
Chaucer used the East Midland dialect of Middle English. This dialect was the most common colloquial language at the time and became the basis for modern English.

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han that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour,

5
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours y-ronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye

10
That slepen al the nyght with open eye,
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages,
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrymages,
And palmeres for to seken strange strynges,
Twenty-nine pilgrims are on their way to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket in Canterbury.

The time is April, and the place is the Tabard Inn in Southwark (SUTH erk), just outside London.
Chaucer uses **indirect characterization** when he tells how each character

- looks and dresses

  This yeoman wore a coat and hood of green,
  And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen

- speaks and acts

  Her greatest oath was only “By St. Loy!”

- thinks and feels

  And gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.
Chaucer also uses **direct characterization**, when he comes right out and tells us what a character’s nature is—virtuous, vain, clever, and so on.

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.

[End of Section]
A **frame story** is a literary device that binds together several different narratives. It is a story (or stories) **within** a story.

- In *The Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims’ journey is the outer story.
- The tales the pilgrims tell are stories within a story.
- The tales themselves also have thematic unity.
Chaucer had twenty-nine characters to introduce, so he couldn’t develop any one character at great length. Instead, he provided a few well-chosen details that would make each character stand out vividly.
As you read the Prologue, pay close attention to any details that help give you an immediate impression of a character.

- Keep a pen and notebook handy to jot down key details of dress, appearance, and behavior.

- Note that some details contradict what the characters think of themselves (or want others to think of them).

[End of Section]