

THE CANTERBURY TALES

A COMEDY IN TWO ACTS ADAPTED BY
Lindsay Price

FROM THE ORIGINAL BY
Geoffrey Chaucer



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Chaucer's classic collection of tales comes to life in this modern adaptation.

Playwright Bio

Lindsay Price is the Vice President of Theatrefolk Inc. and the co-creator of the Drama Teacher Academy. She has been involved with theatre education for over 25 years as a playwright, adjudicator, workshop instructor, resource writer, curriculum supervisor, professional development creator and keynote speaker. Her plays have been performed in schools all over the world with over 1000 productions a year.

Synopsis

A group of travelers heads off on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. To pass the time, the Hostess suggests that they tell tales. The tales feature stories of love, greed, jealousy, patience, and death. And perhaps the Cook will find a word that rhymes with orange.

Pilgrim Characters

The Hostess: [W] The owner of the Tabard Inn, where the pilgrims stay. She travels with them to Canterbury.

The Wife of Bath: [W] She has been married five times and is searching for number six. She is from Bath.

The Cook: [W] The cook at the Tabard Inn.

The Prioress: [W] The prioress is in charge of a priory (a monastery).

The Reeve: [M] The manager of a manor in the later medieval period.

The Pardoner: [M] The Pardoner sells religious forgiveness and relics for a fee.

The Miller: [M] The Miller operates a mill, which grinds grain (corn or wheat) into flour.

The Franklin: [M] A Franklin is a property owner, but not of noble birth.

Depending on the casting, the pilgrims also play all of the characters in the tales. Alternatively there can be a group of actors that play the tale characters. Dramatic license has also been taken in some cases in terms of gender.

Themes

Social satire, class structure, competition, love, friendship, relationships, death, betrayal, jealousy

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What is a pilgrimage? What can you infer from the word?
- ★ What is social commentary? What is an example of social commentary? What's the purpose of social commentary?
- ★ What's your favourite type of story? Serious? Comedic? Romantic? Satire? Horror?
- ★ Why do we tell stories? What's the purpose of "telling" a story?
- ★ In your opinion, what makes a good story?
- ★ Do you think you're an engaging storyteller? Why or why not?
- ★ Do you know anyone who tells a good story? What makes them good at it?

Pre-Read Activities

Research Project: Pilgrim's way

- ★ In small groups students will research the ancient Pilgrim's Way from Southwark to Canterbury. Who were the pilgrims? What did they represent in Ancient Greece? What are their stories? What was the journey like for pilgrims? How many pilgrims took the journey? What was the purpose of the pilgrimage? Why did pilgrims want to go to Canterbury?

- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
 - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
 - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

Research Project: Author

- ★ Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research the author of the original text, Geoffrey Chaucer.
 - » Who is Geoffrey Chaucer?
 - » What is his background?
 - » When did he write *The Canterbury Tales*?
 - » What else did he write?
 - » Was he a “successful” writer? Was he able to make a living as a writer?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they’ve learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? Will you create a quiz? Give students a way to demonstrate what they’ve learned.

The Canterbury Tales: Original Text

- ★ The original *The Canterbury Tales* was written between 1387 and 1400 in Middle English. When you look at the original text, it looks like a different language. This is one of the barriers to reading *The Canterbury Tales*.
- ★ As a class look at the provided line of text from the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*.
 - » “Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote, The droghte of March hath perced to the roote”

- ★ At first glance, have students identify what words they recognize and what words they don't. What words do students see that we still use today?
- ★ Go through the line:
 - » Have students read aloud the line.
 - » Identify the words in the line that everyone knows.
 - » Identify words that they don't recognize.
 - » Given the words they do know, can students infer the line's meaning?
 - » Pair students up and have them guess the full line. Pairs will write a modern version of the line.
 - » Pairs will share their findings with the class. What are the similarities and differences in how pairs interpreted the text?
- ★ Share a modern version of the line: "When April has with sweet showers, pierced March's drought to the roots"

Journey Reflection

- ★ Write a reflection about the ultimate journey. If you were going to take the most important journey of your life, what would it be? What would you give up to take this journey? How would it feel to have to leave home to take this journey? Do you see yourself taking such a journey sooner or much, much later?

Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a short poem as their source material. The point is for students to work quickly.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter

- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the poem into a scene. They don't have to use the words of the poem, but the scene must be connected to the poem. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.
 - » What characters can be derived from the poem?
 - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the poem?
 - » What conflict can be derived from the poem?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.

One-Word-at-a-Time Storytelling Contest

- ★ Discuss the characteristics of a good story. What elements do you need to engage an audience if you're telling a story? When you don't have special effects, lighting and sound design, sets or costumes, what do you have to do to be a good storyteller?
- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will give themselves a name. Each group will tell a story, one word at a time. They will be given a title, and their job is to tell a cohesive story, focusing on the elements of good storytelling when each person only gets one word.
- ★ If you like, frame this exercise as a contest: best story wins (i.e., it is cohesive from beginning to end, and it engages an audience).
- ★ The first group will come up to the front of the class and decide their order. Give the group a title (you'll want a different title for each group). The group will then tell the story one word at a time.

- ★ Continue until all the groups have gone. Then have each student place an anonymous ballot, writing down the name of the group they think told the best story.

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *The Canterbury Tales* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What's one reason pilgrims go to see the shrine of Thomas Beckett?
3. What's one of the dangers of the road to Canterbury?
4. How many times has the Wife of Bath been married?
5. Based on his introduction, is the Pardoner a sincere individual?
6. What does the Reeve do?
7. What is the Hostess' proposal?
8. The Prioress' Tale:

- a. What animal is Chanticleer?
- b. What makes Pertelote snappy?
- c. What causes Chanticleer to wake with dread?
- d. How does the Fox capture Chanticleer?
- e. How does Chanticleer get free?
- f. What's the moral of the story?

9. The Miller's Tale:

- a. How does the Miller describe Nicholas?
- b. True or False: Allison is faithful to her husband.
- c. What does Nicholas tell John he has found in his astrology?
- d. How many wooden buckets does Nicholas tell John to gather?
- e. Who plays Absalom?

10. Why is the Reeve upset with the Miller?

11. The Reeve's Tale

- a. Who is the main character in The Reeve's Tale and why are they significant?
- b. What animal does Maude love?
- c. What is Allain's plan? Does he succeed or fail at first?
- d. What happens to Allain's horse?
- e. Who does Hilde hit with the staff?
- f. What proverb does the Reeve recite at the end?

12. What's one reason the Cook gives for not telling a story?

13. The Wife of Bath's Tale

- a. What is the question the Queen challenges the Knight to answer in exchange for his life?
- b. What does the Wife of Bath say is the answer to the question?
- c. What does Bertha require of the Knight for the answer?
- d. Does the Knight live or die?

14. The Franklin's Tale

- a. What does the Franklin say the tale is about?
- b. What does Arviragus say he will never show or feel?
- c. What is the name of the other man in love with Dorigen?
- d. What task does Dorigen give this man?
- e. Does he succeed?
- f. Who says, "You must keep your word; I expect it of you"?

15. The Cook's Tale

- a. What word does the Cook realize there is no rhyme for?

16. The Pardoner's Tale

- a. What is the name of the poor slob going to his grave?
- b. True or False: Jacob is afraid of Death.
- c. What do the three friends find at the base of the tree?
- d. Who goes back to town for food and drink? And what do they do to the drink?

- e. Who's alive at the end of the story?
 - f. What is the moral of the story?
17. Who is the winner of the storytelling contest?
 18. What voice do all the pilgrims hear at the end?
 19. Do you have any questions about the play?
 20. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. Are there any words that you don't understand? Identify and define them.
2. What is the definition of a social commentary? Is *The Canterbury Tales* a social commentary?
3. Why do you think the characters are all individually introduced? This introduction also occurred in the original. What is the significance of the introductions?
4. How does The Prioress' Tale use personification?
5. The opening stage direction of The Franklin's Tale refers to the tale as "a dance." How would that impact the staging?
6. *The Canterbury Tales* was originally written in verse. In your opinion, why has the playwright chosen not to keep the verse form for the majority of the tales?
7. Conversely, The Franklin's Tale has retained the verse form. Why do you think the playwright chose to do this?
8. Under the "Character" section the playwright says, "Although I have tried to remain true to the original, dramatic license has been taken in some cases in terms of gender and a need to make the stories fit the size of the cast." In your opinion, why has the playwright made these choices?
9. Based on the Wife of Bath's language, behaviour, and personality, how would you costume this character?

10. Based on the Pardoner's language, behaviour, and personality, how would you costume this character?
11. What celebrity would you cast as the Miller?
12. What is the significance of the Cook's character? What is their purpose?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *The Canterbury Tales*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about society? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about the purpose of storytelling? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is the playwright trying to say about love? Cite the text to support your answer.
5. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ What is one scene or moment that stands out to you? Why?
- ★ Is this version of the original an example of a social commentary?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Set Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward:
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?

- » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Modern Adaption

- ★ Divide the class into groups. Each group will make a modern version of a moment in the play.
- ★ How would they adapt the situation, the characters, and the outcome for the 21st century? What is the modern version of a pilgrim? What would a modern version of The Prioress' Tale look like? How would you portray a modern death from The Pardoner's Tale?

The Canterbury Tales: New Scene

- ★ There are more stories in the original *Canterbury Tales*. Have students write a new scene for one of those stories.
- ★ Divide students into small groups and give each group a paragraph description of another tale, one that's not in the adaptation. If you have time, look at the original text and see what they can infer.
- ★ Groups will discuss and decide how they will create their new scene.
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward. What was it like to theatricalize a story?

Original Social Commentary

- ★ Have students discuss and define "social commentary."
- ★ Divide students into groups.
- ★ Groups will, based on their discussion and definition, create a one-minute modern social commentary. What aspect of society are they commenting on?
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present their scene.
- ★ Discuss with students the impact of using theatre to address issues in society.

Playwright Process

Playwright Lindsay Price talks about her process writing and adapting The Canterbury Tales. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

1. Why did you choose to adapt this story?

The original text of *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer can be a bear to get through. Old English is not fun. I had to take an Old English course in university at 8:30 in the morning. It was not my best work.

But these tales have always stayed with me, mostly because once you get beyond the inaccessibility of the language, the characters and the stories are actually fun. Some of them are more than fun; they're downright bawdy. This is something that often gets lost. But I knew *The Canterbury Tales* would make great stage material filled with interesting characters and a wide variety of stories. Of all my adaptations it's the one that's done the most and I think it's for that very reason. The stories and the characters stand the test of time.

2. What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

Most of the hard work happened before I wrote a single word of the play. I had to make sure I fully understood the stories in their original form, and then I had to decide which of the tales I was going to include in the adaptation and how I was going to adapt them. That took a long time and a lot of brain power. But it all paid off in the end because I had a clear vision of the characters — not only what they were saying in their stories but why they were telling their stories. Once I had that knowledge, the adaptation practically wrote itself. Not really, but I do remember thoroughly enjoying the writing process.

3. What was it like to see the play performed?

I have seen the play performed so many times over the years! And I love the ways different productions have interpreted the text, especially when it comes to the technical elements. I have seen full-on era-appropriate costumes and full sets. I have seen it done with a modern look and a few cubes. It all works because the characters and the stories speak for themselves. I've really enjoyed how they've been presented.