

Study Questions for the “General Prologue” of *The Canterbury Tales*

1. When does the pilgrimage take place? Why is this significant? How does Chaucer describe the motive (or motives) of the pilgrims?
2. Look at the first 18 lines. Paraphrase their literal meaning in simple, modern English. What other impressions do you get as you hear the lines — beside the information that it's spring and people want to go on pilgrimages?
3. Why does the narrator describe the Knight first? What kinds of details does the narrator notice — physical appearance, values, and so on? How does he know what he reports? What do you think of the Knight?
4. How does the Squire differ from the Knight? What motivates him to go on the pilgrimage? (Compare his father.) What does the narrator notice about him?
5. How does the narrator feel about the Prioress? What details does he notice (for example, see how often her table — and other — manners come up; compare the Knight)? What does the narrator think about her tendency to weep over dead mice? What do you think? What do you make of the motto on her brooch?
6. What does the narrator first notice about the Monk? What other details does he notice (compare the descriptions of the other pilgrims)? What does the narrator think about the Monk's hunting and jewelry? What are the culminating details of the narrator's description? What impression do you have of the Monk?
7. What do you think about the “wanton,” “merry” Friar? Why was he “an esy man to yive penaunce”? Why did he keep “knives / And pinnes to yiven faire wives”? What does the narrator admire about the Friar? What evidence does he give that “Ther was no man nowher so vertuous” as the Friar? Do you agree with the narrator's assessment? Why or why not?
8. Is the Merchant “a worthy man withal”? What are his virtues? What kinds of characteristics does the narrator notice about him?
9. Is the Clerk as full of “moral vertu” as his speech? What details does the narrator single out besides his devotion to his calling?
10. What is the narrator's estimate of the Sergeant at Law? What do you make of the comment that “he seemed bisier than he was”?
11. Compare the Clerk and his values and way of life with the pilgrims described near him — the Merchant, Sergeant at Law, and Franklin.
12. Why is the Franklin going on the pilgrimage? The narrator seems impressed that “It snewed in his hous of mete and drinke” (346); what do you think?

13. How does the mention of the Cook's "mormal" (398) affect your desire to taste his "black manger" (389)?
14. How does the Shipman make his living? Can you find any evidence in the narrator's description that he is not "a good felawe"?
15. How does it affect your opinion of the Doctor of Physic to hear that "He kepte that he was in pestilence"? The last thing we hear about him is that "he loved gold." Why, according to the narrator, does the doctor love gold so much?
16. What is the Wife of Bath like? What do you make of someone who has had five husbands, not counting "other compaignye" before she was married? Why is she going on the pilgrimage?
17. What do you think of the Parson? What do you make of his maxim, "if gold rust, what shal iren do"? Find the other times gold appears among the descriptions of the pilgrims (Prioress, Monk, and Doctor) and compare its role.
18. What is the Plowman like: what are his values? What does he look like? Why is he going on the pilgrimage?
19. What do the last group of pilgrims (Reeve, Miller, Summoner, Pardoner, and Manciple: 514-16) have in common?
20. How does the Miller's physical description give us clues about his character? How does he make his living?
21. Why does the narrator admire the Manciple? How does he make money?
22. What is the Reeve's relation to his master? What does the narrator think of this?
23. Why does Chaucer save the Summoner and the Pardoner for last? Note their relation to the Church, their respective forms of sexuality, their personalities. Which one seems least appealing to you? Why?
24. Summarize your impressions of the narrator — his values, tastes, views. What sorts of things does he care about, notice, comment on? Notice what he says about himself and when. Why does he include himself among the last group of pilgrims? Does the narrator speak for Chaucer the poet — or do the two see things differently? How do you know? Why did Chaucer choose this kind of man for a narrator?