Canterbury Tales Prologue Questions

* What season is described in the opening passage of The Canterbury Tales? What do people especially want to do when this season comes, according to the narrator?

• Where especially do English people want to go? Why do they want to go there?

• How many pilgrims does the narrator claim he meets at the Tabard inn?

• **THE KNIGHT**

• What are some of the places where the Knight has fought?

• What does the Knight do to his opponents if he beats them in the tournament ring ("the lists")?

• What is the Knight's conversation and speech like, according to the narrator?

• What is the Knight's armor (his habergeon) like in appearance? Why do you suppose it look like this?

• What pilgrim is the son of this Knight?

• **THE SQUIRE**

• How does the Squire's appearance contrast with that of the Knight?

• How old is the Squire? What talents does he have and how do they contrast with the Knight? Why does the Squire sleep so little?

• **THE YEOMAN**

• What's a Yeoman in the medieval world? Why is the Yeoman so sun-tanned? (What does this trait suggest about him, his activities, and how he spends a time?) Why do you suppose the Knight would want a servant who is good with a bow?

• **THE PRIORESS**

• What's a prioress? What is the name of the particular prioress who joins the pilgrimage company?

• What foreign language does the Prioress speak? Where (according to her accent) did she learn to speak French? What might this detail reveal about her background?

• How does the Prioress eat her food? What does this detail suggest about her background?

• What is the Prioress's attitude toward animals? What does this suggest about about her?

• What does her golden brooch have written on it? What are two ways of interpreting this quotation?

• What four people accompany the prioress?

• **THE MONK**

• The Monk, we hear, is an "outrider." What is an outrider in a monastery?

• What noise do people hear as the Monk rides past them?

• What is the Monk's attitude toward the Benedictine Rule or the Mauritian Rule (i.e., the guidelines monks are supposed to obey)?

• What does the Monk think of the argument that holy men shouldn't hunt animals?

• What does the Monk think about studying books?

• What does the Monk think of Saint Augustine's Rule, which requires that monastic clergy work with their hands at manual labor?

• What animals follow the Monk around when he rides?

• What's unusual about the sleeves of the Monk's habit (robe)? Why does this seem strange for a monastic habit?

• What sort of pin does the Monk wear in his habit? Why is this pin strange or unusual for a Monk's clothing?

• **THE FRIAR**

• What is the Friar's name?

• What does the Friar frequently arrange for young women in his parish? What are two ways of interpreting this "generosity"?

• What sort of absolution does the Friar grant to sinners?

• What locations does the Friar know especially well in every town? What sort of people does he know very well?

• We hear that the Friar was particularly of much help on "love-days." What are two ways of interpreting this phrase, "love-days"?

• **THE MERCHANT**

• What sort of hat does the Merchant wear?

• What sort of subject does the Merchant always talk about?

• What does the narrator say the Merchant's name is? (Trick question!)

• **THE OXFORD CLERK**

• What does the word "Clerk" mean in medieval times?

• What does the Clerk of Oxford look like in terms of his physical build? What condition are his clothes in? What does this suggest about the Clerk?

• What does the Clerk apparently spend all his money on?

• How talkative is the Clerk? When he talks, what traits characterize his speech?

• What two things would the Clerk "gladly" do?

• **THE LAWYER**

• The lawyer (Sergeant-at-law) is capable of quoting what verbatim? How busy is the lawyer?

• **THE FRANKLIN**

• The Franklin is described in particular detail. What is his beard like? What color are his cheeks? (What modern legendary figure does he resemble from our holiday season?)

• What does it mean when the text reads the Franklin "was Epicurus' very son"? Who was Epicurus and what is Epicurean philosophy?

• To what saint is the Franklin compared explicitly? Why is this an appropriate comparison?

• What substances "snow" inside his house?

• **THE GUILDSMEN**

• The guildsmen--the Haberdasher, the Carpenter, the Weaver, the Dyer, and the Arras (Tapestry) Maker--all have eating utensils made of the same metal. What metal is this? [Lecture question: Why are they carrying items of this metal?] What hired help do the guildsmen bring with them?

• **THE COOK**

• Who does the Cook apparently work for in the pilgrimage company?

• What does the Cook have on his shin? What does this indicate about the Cook's health or hygiene?

• What normal color is the sweet blanc-mange the Cook fixes? [Hint: the word "blanc" provides a clue!] Why is this particularly gross, given earlier details about the Cook's health?

• **THE SAILOR**

• What town is the sailor possibly from? [Lecture question: What is the area around this town famous for in the medieval period?]

• What does the Sailor keep on a cord around his neck? What does he keep "under his arm?" What does he keep hidden under his clothing {i.e., "and down")? Why do you suppose he keeps three of these items? What does it suggest about what sort of "sailor" this man is?

• What does the Sailor steal while the traders on his boat are asleep?

• If the Sailor gets involved in a naval battle, what does he do with the people he captures, according to the narrator? What does that mean?

• What is the name of his vessel?

• **THE PHYSICIAN (DOCTOR OF PHYSIC)**

• Why are the stars important for the Doctor of Physick's medical treatments? (i.e., what "science" of the stars does the Doctor ascribe to?)

• What is this stuff about the "humour" of "hot or cold, of moist or dry"?

• What profitable business arrangement does the Doctor have with "apothecaries"? (What are apothecaries?)

• What sort of books is the physician well versed in?

• What book does the physician not know very well?

• What material does he like best of all as a "fine cordial"?

• **THE WIFE OF BATH**

• What physical disability does the Wife of Bath have?

• What does the Wife of Bath wear on her head? How much does this weigh? Why do you suppose she wears this?

• What color are her stockings?

• How many husbands has she had?

• What are two ways of interpreting that line about "not counting other company in youth"?

• How many times had the Wife of Bath journeyed to Jerusalem? What other places has she traveled to? What do these wide travels suggest about her as a character?

• What are the Wife of Bath's teeth like?

• What does the Wife wear on her feet/boots to help steer her horse? Why is this unusual for the period?

• When we hear that, "For of that art she'd learned the old, old dance," what is this old dance the speaker is referring to, given the context of her knowledge in the previous lines?

• **THE PARSON**

• According to the narrator, the Parson is hesitant to "curse [his parishioners] to get a tithe." Instead, what does the Parson do with his own income and goods?

• Why does the narrator note that the Parson's parish was "wide" with "houses far asunder" before describing the Parson's travels? How does this characterize the Parson?

• What does the Parson do first before he teaches his flock?

• When the Parson asks allegorically, "if gold rust, what shall poor iron do?" what is he talking about? Who or what is the gold and who or what is the iron?

• When the narrator speaks about a "shitty shepherd, shepherding clean sheep," what is he talking about?

• Why does the Parson refuse promotion to London or Saint Paul's Cathedral?

• **THE PLOWMAN**

• To whom is the Plowman related? What sort of work does this Plowman do all day?

• What does the Plowman wear and how does this connect to the early setting of The Canterbury Tales?

• **THE MILLER (ROBIN)**

• What's the Miller like in terms of physical build?

• The Miller has an usual party-trick. What technique does he use to remove a door from its hinges?

• What color is his hair or beard? To what animals does the narrator compare this hair color?

• What's unusual or disturbing about the Miller's nose?

• We find out the Miller is good at jesting and "poetizing," but what's the only thing he writes/composes poetry about?

• What does it mean when the speaker says the Miller had a "gold thumb?"

• What unusual musical instrument does the Miller play? According to the last lines of the portrait, where does he apparently travel in the pilgrimage order?

• **THE MANICPLE**

• What is a manciple? What apparently is the Manciple's attitude to "learned men" in comparison to his own wit?

• **THE REEVE (OSWALD)**

• What does it mean in terms of bodily humors that the Reeve is "choleric"?

• How does the Reeve keep his hair and beard trimmed?

• What is the Reeve's bodily build like, judging by the narrator's description of the Reeve's legs?

• The narrator states that "Yet no man ever found him in arrears." What are two ways of interpreting this statement about the Reeve's skills in managing?

• Why are business agents more afraid of the Reeve than they are afraid of death?

• Before Oswald was a Reeve, what job did he have?

• From what region of England does the Reeve come?

• What position does the Reeve always ride in as he travels with the pilgrimage company? Why do you suppose he rides there?

• **THE SUMMONER**

• What is a summoner?

• What skin problems does Chaucer's Summoner have?

• What foods does the Summoner like best?

• What is the Summoner's mastery of Latin limited to?

• Why does the narrator think the Summoner is a generous, friendly fellow? (i.e., For what trade would the Summoner let a person off easily when that person was summoned to court?) What are two grammatical ways of reading that line about "suffer for a quart of wine, / Some good fellow to have his concubine"? What two possible antecedents could the pronoun "his" refer to?

• The text tells us, "Between ourselves, though, he could pluck a gull." The original Middle English reads, "ful prively a fynch eek koude he pulle." What does this mean?

• How had the Summoner gained power over all the boys and girls of the diocese?

• The Summoner is making an unusual fashion statement. What does he wear upon his head, and what does he carry for a buckler (a shield)? How might this be a parody of scripture? (Check out Ephesians 6:16, a verse some priests required crusaders and pilgrims to read before going on a pilgrimage or crusade).

• What pilgrim in particular is a buddy to the Summoner and sings love-songs with him?

• **THE PARDONER**

• What is a pardoner? What is a pardon or indulgence?

• What is the Pardoner's hair like? What is this "Veronica" that the Pardoner has sewed to his cap?

• What documents are stuffed full into the Pardoner's wallet?

• What does the Pardoner's voice sound like?

• What's unusual about the Pardoner's beard? (trick question!)

• What does the speaker mean when he states, "I think he [the Pardoner] was a gelding or a mare"?

• What does the Pardoner claim about the pillow-case he carries?

• What does the Pardoner claim about his bottle filled with pig bones?

• What other fake relics does the Pardoner carry to sell?

• Chaucer's narrator notes that the Pardoner "moste preche . . . To wynne silver." Why do you suppose the Pardoner seeks to win silver? Why not gold?

• When the narrator finishes listing the 29 pilgrims, what does he apologize about to the reader in lines 720-746?

• **THE HOST (HARRY BAILEY)**

• What traits distinguish the host?

• What sport or entertainment does the Host suggest for the pilgrim company?

• Describe the rules of the game the Host establishes. How many stories will each pilgrim tell on the way to Canterbury? How many stories will each pilgrim tell on the way back to London?

• What are the two criteria used to determine the best tale? What is the prize the best storyteller will receive? Where will the winner receive this prize? Who will pay for it?

• Who will judge the contest? According to the Host, if anybody "gainsays" or questions his rule, what will that person have to do along the journey?

• How does Harry Bailey (the Host) determine the order of the storytellers? Why is it suspicious that the Knight "happens" to draw first and "happens" to win?