Chaucer’s
The Canterbury Tales
Chaucer’s life

- Born about 1343.
- The son of a wine merchant.
- Received an excellent education.
- His skill and inventiveness as a writer, a clever mind and practical skills helped him raise his social status.
- Worked as a controller of the customs for the port of London.
- Took part in important diplomatic missions.
- Died in 1400 and was the first poet to be buried in Westminster Abbey, in Poets’ Corner.
2. The Canterbury Tales

- It is a **narrative poem**.
- It is told **in verse**.
- It contains a variety of **narrative elements**: the setting in time and place, the description of characters, the use of a narrator.
- It has links with the **moral views** of the time.
- It gives insight into **individual characters** as regards their lifestyles, their psychology and their experiences.
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

2. *The Canterbury Tales*

It is an *estates satire*

*stock characters* are presented

from the *three orders* of society and the *rising middle class*
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

3. The structure

A general prologue, where the pilgrims are introduced

Twenty-four tales

usually preceded by a prologue, which introduces the theme of the tale

and sometimes followed by an epilogue
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

4. The story

- **Thirty people**, including **Chaucer as narrator**, meet at the Tabard inn in London.
- They join **a pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral** and the shrine of Thomas Becket.
- The **innkeeper** suggests that every pilgrim should tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back; the pilgrim who tells the best story will win a free dinner.
- The various tales are both **religious and humorous, moral and satirical**.
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

5. The pilgrimage

- Why a pilgrimage to Canterbury?
  - Canterbury Cathedral is the shrine of Thomas Beckett, England’s first martyr.
  - Taking a pilgrimage was common in Chaucer’s day.
  - People went on a pilgrimage to ask for healing or forgiveness of sins but also to socialise.
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

6. The style

- It is written in **rhyming couplets** (AABB) made up of **iambic pentameters**

  - Example:

    *And bathed every vein in such liquor*
Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*

7. The language

- By the time Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*:

  - English had replaced French as the **language of education** in the local schools.
  
  - English was becoming the **language of government**.

  - There was a growing demand for **literary works** in English.

- Chaucer used **a literary language** shaped by French and Latin models but **built upon the old popular tradition** and on a deep knowledge of **actual speech**.
8. Characterisation

- Chaucer wanted to give a portrait of English society.
- He introduced the characters in the General Prologue.
- He did not follow the social hierarchy of presentation of the time.
- He mixed female and male characters to underline the growing importance women were assuming within the middle classes.
‘Dynamic individualisation’ in antithesis with the conventional medieval character portrait which was generally rather static.

The descriptions of the pilgrims emphasise:
- clothes;
- tools;
- personal qualities;
- personality.

The names given to the pilgrims refer to their professions.