

Literature for Life Volume 2

Section 1

From the Beginnings to the 1700s

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales

Knowledge base

First reading

➔ NOTEBOOK

1. What do you already know about Geoffrey Chaucer? Refer to your notebook.

2. You are going to read a description from the *General Prologue* of the pilgrim called The Prioress.

a. What is a prioress? Where would she live and work? What kind of person do you expect her to be? Choose from these adjectives:

- a. rich
- b. fashionable
- c. religious
- d. modest
- e. humble
- f. passionate
- g. self-indulgent



▲ Portrait of Geoffrey Chaucer in Thomas Hoccleve's *De regimine principum*, early 15th century.

🎧 MP3 09

b. Listen to and read the text (lines 118-162), in a modern English translation. Take notes under the following headings:

- a. Name and social status _____
- b. Physical appearance _____
- c. Clothes / style of dressing _____
- d. Education and manners _____
- e. Experience of life _____

T 9

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales (1386?-95?)

from *The General Prologue* — The Prioress

There was also a nun, a prioress,
 Whose smile was unaffected and demure;
 Her greatest oath was just, 'By St Eloi!¹
 And she was known as Madame Eglantine.
 5 She sang the divine service prettily,
 And through the nose, becomingly intoned;
 And she spoke French well and elegantly
 As she'd been taught it at Stratford-at-Bow,²
 For French of Paris was to her unknown.
 10 Good table manners she had learnt as well:
 She never let a crumb from her mouth fall;
 She never soiled her fingers, dipping deep
 Into the sauce; when lifting to her lips
 Some morsel, she was careful not to spill
 15 So much as one small drop upon her breast.
 Her greatest pleasure was in etiquette.
 She used to wipe her upper lip so clean,
 No print of grease inside her cup was seen,
 Not the least speck, when she had drunk from it.
 20 Most daintily she'd reach for what she ate.
 No question, she possessed the greatest charm,
 Her demeanour was so pleasant, and so warm;
 Though at pains to ape the manners of the court,
 And be dignified, in order to be thought
 25 A person well deserving of esteem.
 But, speaking of her sensibility,
 She was so full of charity and pity
 That if she saw a mouse caught in a trap,
 And it was dead or bleeding, she would weep.
 30 She kept some little dogs³, and these she fed
 On roast meat, or on milk and fine white bread.
 But how she'd weep if one of them were dead,
 Or if somebody took a stick to it!
 She was all sensitivity and tender heart.
 35 Her veil was pleated most becomingly;
 Her nose well-shaped; eyes blue-grey, of great beauty;
 And her mouth tender, very small, and red.
 And there's no doubt she had a fine forehead,
 Almost a span in breadth, I'd swear it was,
 40 For certainly she was not undersized.

Della PRIORA vi comincio a dire
 che, semplice sorriso e cuor contento,
 faceva a sant'Eligio giuramento.
 Madre Eglentina, essa era chiamata,
 e sempre all'intonar sacra cantata
 la voce sua nasale dispiegava.
 Passabile francese essa parlava,
 così come si studia nei conventi,
 che quello di Parigi non lo senti.
 In tavola poneva ogni attenzione
 a misurare sempre il suo boccone
 senza affondare in salsa le sue dita.

Ella prendeva il cibo sì compita
 che mai goccia sul petto le cadeva,
 modi cortesi sempre ella teneva
 e le sue labbra tanto si nettava
 che, sulla coppa, certo non lasciava
 ombra dell'unto, dopo aver bevuto.
 Gran portamento aveva, e mantenuto
 ha sempre un fare amabile ed aperto,
 gradevole persona era di certo.
 In nobili maniere si atteggiava
 e, come a corte, compassata stava
 nell'accettar dovuta riverenza.
 Era, per dire della sua coscienza,
 di carità pervasa e sì pietosa
 da lacrime versar per poca cosa,
 pur fosse un topo in trappola finito.
 Ai suoi cagnetti, buon cibo condito
 e latte dava, e avrebbe pianto molto
 se morte uno dei cani avesse colto,
 o bastonato appena fosse quello,
 davvero aveva cuore tenerello!
 Soggòlo pieghettato essa portava,
 e con begli occhi grigi ti guardava;
 di bocca rossa, piccola e carnosa,
 bel naso e fronte bellamente ariosa
 che d'ampiezza una spanna superava
 e alla statura sua ben si accordava.

1. 'By St Eloi!': a mild form of exclamation ('Per Sant'Eligio').

2. **Stratford-at-Bow**: the English convent where the Prioress had studied French.

3. **little dogs**: she kept dogs against church law which forbade nuns to keep dogs.

Her cloak, I noticed, was most elegant.
 A coral rosary with gauds of green
 She carried on her arm; and from it hung
 A brooch of shining gold; inscribed thereon
 45 Was, first of all, a crowned 'A,'
 And under, *Amor vincit omnia*⁴.
 (modern English translation by Richard Wright)

Tonaca elegante aveva indosso
 e un bel rosario di corallo rosso
 e pietre verdi, il polso le cingeva.
 E una spilla pur da lì pendeva
 con una A coronata e con il motto
Amor vincit omnia, inciso sotto.
 (Italian translation by Vincenzo La Gioia)

4. **Amor vincit omnia:** Latin for 'Love conquers all' (*L'amore vince ogni cosa*).

In more detail

Content

- 3. What do the following facts suggest about the Prioress?
 - a. she keeps two dogs against church rules _____
 - b. she wears a golden brooch with a motto about love _____

4. Describe the Prioress's personality. Use words from the text and make inferences from what the poet says about them.

5. Look at the choice of words and details used in the description. Is the description realistic or idealised? Support your answer with quotations.

6. The poet's tone of voice in the two descriptions is gently ironic. Which of the following devices does Chaucer use to convey his irony? Give examples from the text.
- a. He says something about the object of irony while he means quite a different thing. _____
 - d. He uses hyperbole, that is, he points out exaggerated attributes or details of the object of irony. _____
 - c. He points out some aspects which are different from what one would expect in reality. _____

Language and tone

Conclusions

7. Which of these typical Chaucerian themes can you recognise in the description of the Prioress? Circle your choices and give evidence.



- a. magic: _____
- b. sensual love: _____
- c. class pride: _____
- d. anti-feminism: _____
- e. platonic love: _____
- f. avarice: _____
- g. feminism: _____
- h. hypocrisy: _____

◀ The Prioress as portrayed at the beginning of her tale in the Ellesmere manuscript, 15th century (Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, CA, US).

➔ NOTEBOOK

Check what you know and how to say it. You are going to use your literature notebook to verify your knowledge about Chaucer and his works, and learn how to express what you know.

- Copy and complete the text in your notebook, check your answers with your teacher.
- In groups, use the completed and corrected texts to write questions and quiz your classmates.

Geoffrey Chaucer's pilgrims in ***The Canterbury Tales*** are human types well-known to popular as well as to literary tradition: for example, the honourable knight, the (1) _____ prioress, the libertine friar, the domineering (2) _____. However, they are not depicted as (3) _____; they are human beings with an irresistible vitality besides their qualities and (4) _____. They come to life first in the poet's descriptions in the *General Prologue*, especially through (5) _____ detail, and then in their tales. The ladylike Prioress has the elegant manners of the (6) _____ class and a charming appearance which is that of a heroine of romance. The poet shows great (7) _____ for her accomplishments; still, he makes her the object of gentle (8) _____ when

admiration
defects
dogs
hypocrisy
irony
Italian
ladylike
Latin
love
nun
personality
realistic
religious
serious
stereotypes
upper
wife

he makes the reader aware that her charity is mainly directed to her own (9) _____ and the motto engraved on her brooch does not seem to refer to spiritual (10) _____ only. The tales are both a means to illustrate aspects of the tellers' (11) _____ and to explore some recurrent themes. For example, the Prioress's tale is on a conventional (12) _____ subject — a miracle connected to the murder of a child — appropriate to her role and status. A dominant theme of the tales is (13) _____ which is hinted at in the figure of the Prioress who looks and behaves much more like a fashionable lady than a (14) _____. Chaucer draws inspiration for his themes from various sources: the English popular and literary tradition, (15) _____ classics (especially Ovid) and the (16) _____ contemporaries Petrarch and Boccaccio. His tone of voice varies in the tales: it may be ironical and mocking, or (17) _____ and thoughtful.