

**Pilgrimage: Sowing Seeds of Modernism on the Soil of Medievalism in *The Canterbury Tales***

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the societal transformation of England from medieval traditions to early modern perspectives as depicted in *The Canterbury Tales*. It analyzes how Chaucer subtly introduces a philosophy akin to global tolerance through his portrayal of diverse characters. The pilgrimage, central to the narrative, symbolizes a convergence of varied social ideologies and plays a crucial role in the cultural evolution of English society and, by extension, the broader world.

**Keywords:** Societal transition, Medieval to Modern shift, Chaucerian philosophy, Tolerance, Pilgrimage, Social diversity

**Introduction**

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* stands as a crucial text marking the gradual transition from medieval values to early modern sensibilities. Structured around a pilgrimage to Canterbury, the work uses this religious journey as both a literal and metaphorical path, inviting readers to examine the evolving dynamics of social order, belief systems, and individuality. The narrative subtly reflects changing societal norms, mirroring the shift from rigid medieval dogmas to a more nuanced modern outlook.

**Pilgrimage in Context: A Medieval Tradition Undergoing Change**

In medieval Europe, pilgrimage was more than a spiritual undertaking—it was a reflection of societal structure and religious commitment. Individuals embarked on arduous journeys seeking divine mercy, healing, or penance. Chaucer integrates this cultural practice not only to anchor his narrative but also to provide a backdrop for the societal transformation underway.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, pilgrimage functions as a narrative device through which Chaucer presents a mosaic of medieval life. The pilgrimage framework allows characters from diverse social backgrounds to engage, thus breaking conventional boundaries and fostering an environment conducive to dialogue, satire, and reflection.

### **Chaucer's Subtle Advocacy for Tolerance**

Although Chaucer did not articulate a contemporary vision of global tolerance, his treatment of diverse characters suggests a proto-humanist understanding of individual differences. The travelers' narratives encompass a spectrum of worldviews, behaviors, and moral attitudes, reflecting a society in flux.

Characters such as the chivalric Knight embody virtues like honor and respect, while others, including the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath, offer complex portrayals that challenge moral and social stereotypes. Through satire, irony, and candid storytelling, Chaucer critiques societal flaws while humanizing each character, fostering a subtle appreciation for diversity and coexistence.

### **The Pilgrims as a Reflection of a Complex Society**

Chaucer's ensemble of pilgrims mirrors the societal stratification of 14th-century England. From nobility and clergy to tradespeople and commoners, their interactions depict a spectrum of human experiences and social roles. The tales they tell not only entertain but also reveal the tensions and hypocrisies embedded in medieval life.

Importantly, the shared pilgrimage journey levels these hierarchies to some extent. The communal act of storytelling allows characters to assert individual voices, breaking away from monolithic narratives typical of earlier literature. This focus on personal experience aligns with emerging notions of subjectivity and individualism, precursors to modern thought.

### **From Social Hierarchies to Emerging Individualism**

While the characters are grounded in distinct social strata, their stories blur the lines of traditional hierarchies. The pilgrimage becomes a space for cross-class interaction, hinting at a budding egalitarian spirit. This dynamic reflects the beginning of a societal shift, as rigid class distinctions gradually gave way to more fluid identities.

Each tale presents a unique lens on morality, belief, and human nature. The diversity of voices introduces readers to the plurality of medieval consciousness, laying the groundwork for the more individualized perspectives that would dominate the Renaissance and later, modern literature.

### **Pilgrimage as a Symbol of Societal Transformation**

The pilgrimage motif in Chaucer's work symbolizes a broader cultural evolution. In the medieval context, it was a deeply religious practice rooted in communal spirituality. However, as the narrative progresses, this journey becomes a metaphor for change—religious, social, and intellectual.

By the time modernism took root centuries later, the motivations for pilgrimage had shifted from spiritual salvation to personal growth, discovery, and cultural engagement. Chaucer's depiction foreshadows this transformation, positioning *The Canterbury Tales* as a bridge between the medieval worldview and the introspective, reason-driven modern era.

### **Narrative Techniques Reflecting Modern Sensibilities**

Chaucer's use of a frame narrative and multiple storytellers reveals an early form of narrative complexity that resonates with modern literary practices. Each pilgrim's story is a window into their psyche and social reality, providing a multifaceted depiction of human experience.

Satirical elements pervade the text, especially in the portrayal of religious figures and societal elites. This critical stance challenges institutional authority and highlights contradictions within accepted norms—a hallmark of modernist critique.

Chaucer's commitment to realism—his attention to speech, behavior, and ordinary detail—enhances the timelessness of his characters. The stories' varied genres and tones further underscore his literary innovation, making the collection both a product of its time and a precursor to modern narrative diversity.

### **Conclusion**

Though written in the late 14th century, *The Canterbury Tales* encapsulates themes and techniques that anticipate modern literary and philosophical developments. Chaucer's portrayal of diverse individuals engaged in shared narrative exploration reflects a society on the cusp of change. Through the microcosm of a pilgrimage, he captures a pivotal historical moment—where medieval structures begin to yield to the human-centered, skeptical, and diverse spirit of the modern age. This paper describes the transition of the society of England from medievalism to modernism in *The Canterbury Tales*. It aims to depict Chaucer's philosophy of Global tolerance. It also describes the assembly of the people of all different social dogmas in pilgrimage and its role to bring the changes in the society of England as well as world.

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