PRIMARY SOURCE: Decameron [Literary Excerpt]

Giovanni Boccaccio provided the most famous description of what happened during the Black Death in Italy. His report on the behavior of the Florentines after plague entered their city during the spring of 1348 serves as introduction and frame for his collection of 100 tales entitled the Decameron. The epidemic provides the pretext for a group of young men and women to leave Florence and retire to a pleasant villa in the countryside where they entertain themselves by telling stories over 10 days. Though the novella range from the bawdy to the pious, the story telling is light hearted in keeping with the purpose of restorative diversion.

Boccaccio's introduction, however, has a very different tone. Here the author relates in precise detail the gruesome symptoms of the disease and the horrific circumstances that took place in Florence as the epidemic swept through the town disrupting all forms of normal human relations. Government, medical care, and neighborliness broke down. Some people secluded themselves and restricted their diet, others recklessly gave themselves over to pleasure, and still others tried to behave temperately. But most distressing of all, according to Boccaccio, was the collapse of families and the abandonment of children.

Primary Source Text: It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbors and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance; this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them.

**Question #1- Would parents today act in a similar fashion if this event were to repeat itself??**

**The Canterbury Tales: General Prologue & Frame Story**

***The Canterbury Tales*** tell the story of a group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury who engage in a tale-telling contest to pass the time. Besides watching the interactions between the characters, we get to read 24 of the tales the pilgrims tell.  [Geoffrey Chaucer](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/chaucer_geoffrey.shtml) likely wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in the late 1380s and early 1390s, after his retirement from life as a civil servant. In this professional life, Chaucer was able to travel from his home in England to France and Italy. There, he not only had the chance to read Italian and French literature, but possibly, even to meet Boccaccio, whose [*Decameron*](http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/23700) – a collection of tales told by Italian nobility holed up in a country house to escape the plague ravaging their city – may have inspired the frame story of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer's decision to write in his country's language, English, rather than in the Latin of so many of his educated colleagues, was something of a risk, and a big break with learned tradition. The risk paid off – we know *The Canterbury Tales* were enormously popular because so many more manuscripts of the tales survive than of almost any other work of this time period. *The Canterbury Tales* were still going strong when the first printers made their way to England. William Caxton published the first printed version of *The Canterbury Tales* in 1476.

One of the things that makes *The Canterbury Tales* so fun to read is the great (and often grotesque) detail with which the narrator describes each of the pilgrims. We learn, for example, that the cook has a pustule on his leg that very much resembles one of the desserts he cooks, or that the miller has a huge, pug nose. For many of his portraits, Chaucer is relying on a medieval tradition of "estates satire," a collection of stereotypes about people based on what occupation they had or what social class they belonged to. Another medieval idea his portraits draw upon is "anticlericalism," a tradition that got its start in reaction to a lot of abuses by clergy in the medieval church, but which basically became a collection of stereotypes about friars, monks, nuns, priests, and the like.

Chaucer draws upon these traditions, but he doesn't necessarily regurgitate them whole: as you'll see when you examine the portraits of the pilgrims more closely, many of them are *not* what they appear. What does that say about the strength of the conclusions we draw about people based upon first impressions, or appearances?

Since *The Canterbury Tales* is a story about a storytelling competition, many of the questions it asks are about stories. As the pilgrims tell their stories, though, they turn out to be talking not just about fairytale people in far-off lands, but also about themselves and their society. This leads to a lot of conflict in a group of pilgrims formed by members of that same society, who often take offense at the versions of themselves they see portrayed in the tales. The General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, and the interactions between the pilgrims that occur in between the tales, then, form a story of their own – dare we say, a Canterbury tale?

**The Canterbury Tales : Prologue**

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| **Here bygynneth the Book of the tales of Caunterbury** | **Here begins the Bookof the Tales of Canterbury** |
| 1: Whan that aprill with his shoures soote2: The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,3: And bathed every veyne in swich licour4: Of which vertu engendred is the flour;5: Whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth6: Inspired hath in every holt and heeth7: Tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne8: Hath in the ram his halve cours yronne,9: And smale foweles maken melodye,10: That slepen al the nyght with open ye11: (so priketh hem nature in hir corages);12: Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,13: And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,14: To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;15: And specially from every shires ende16: Of engelond to caunterbury they wende,17: The hooly blisful martir for to seke,18: That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke. | When April with his showers sweet with fruitThe drought of March has pierced unto the rootAnd bathed each vein with liquor that has powerTo generate therein and sire the flower;When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath,Quickened again, in every holt and heath,The tender shoots and buds, and the young sunInto the Ram one half his course has run,And many little birds make melodyThat sleep through all the night with open eye(So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage)-Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage,And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,To distant shrines well known in sundry lands.And specially from every shire's endOf England they to Canterbury wend,The holy blessed martyr there to seekWho helped them when they lay so ill and weal |
| 19: Bifil that in that seson on a day,20: In southwerk at the tabard as I lay21: Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage22: To caunterbury with ful devout corage,23: At nyght was come into that hostelrye24: Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye,25: Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle26: In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,27: That toward caunterbury wolden ryde.28: The chambres and the stables weren wyde,29: And wel we weren esed atte beste.30: And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,31: So hadde I spoken with hem everichon32: That I was of hir felaweshipe anon,33: And made forward erly for to ryse,34: To take oure wey ther as I yow devyse. | Befell that, in that season, on a dayIn Southwark, at the Tabard, as I layReady to start upon my pilgrimageTo Canterbury, full of devout homage,There came at nightfall to that hostelrySome nine and twenty in a companyOf sundry persons who had chanced to fallIn fellowship, and pilgrims were they allThat toward Canterbury town would ride.The rooms and stables spacious were and wide,And well we there were eased, and of the best.And briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,So had I spoken with them, every one,That I was of their fellowship anon,And made agreement that we'd early riseTo take the road, as you I will apprise. |
| 35: But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,36: Er that I ferther in this tale pace,37: Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun38: To telle yow al the condicioun39: Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,40: And whiche they weren, and of what degree,41: And eek in what array that they were inne;42: And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne. | But none the less, whilst I have time and space,Before yet farther in this tale I pace,It seems to me accordant with reasonTo inform you of the state of every oneOf all of these, as it appeared to me,And who they were, and what was their degree,And even how arrayed there at the inn;And with a knight thus will I first begin. |

**Question #2**- What makes for a good story? Why do we tell stories? Why *should* we tell stories?

**DON QUIXOTE by** Miguel de Cervantes

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra was born in 1547 to a poor Spanish doctor. He joined the army at twenty-one and fought against Turkey at sea and Italy on land. In 1575, pirates kidnapped Cervantes and his brother and sold them as slaves to the Moors, the longtime Muslim enemies of Catholic Spain. Cervantes ended up in Algiers. He attempted to escape his enslavement three times and was eventually ransomed in 1580 and returned to Spain.

Only with the publication of the first volume of *Don Quixote,* in 1605, did Cervantes achieve financial success and popular renown. *Don Quixote* became an instant success, and its popularity even spawned an unauthorized sequel by a writer who used the name Avellaneda. This sequel appeared several years after the original volume, and it inspired Cervantes to hurry along his own second volume, which he published in 1615. Cervantes died later that year.

Many of *Don Quixote*’s recurring elements are drawn from Cervantes’s life: the presence of Algerian pirates on the Spanish coast, the exile of the enemy Moors, the frustrated prisoners whose failed escape attempts cost them dearly, the disheartening battles displaying Spanish courage in the face of plain defeat, and even the ruthless ruler of Algiers. Cervantes’s biases pervade the novel as well, most notably in the form of a mistrust of foreigners.

The novel illustrates Spain’s divergent worlds. Spain at the time was caught in the tumult of a new age, and Cervantes tried to create in *Don Quixote* a place to discuss human identity, morality, and art within this ever-shifting time. Though the Renaissance gave rise to a new humanism in European literature, popular writing continued to be dominated by romances about knights in shining armor practicing the code of chivalry. Chivalry emphasized the protection of the weak, idealized women, and celebrated the role of the wandering knight, who traveled from place to place performing good deeds. Books of chivalry tended to contain melodramatic, fantastical stories about encounters with cruel giants, rescues of princesses in distress, and battles with evil enchanters—highly stylized accounts of shallow characters playing out age-old dramas.

On one level, the first volume of *Don Quixote* is a parody of the romances of Cervantes’s time. Don Quixote rides out like any other knight-errant, searching for the same principles and goals and engaging in similar battles. During these battles, he invokes chivalric ideals, regardless of how ridiculous his adventures may be. On another level, however, the adventures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in the novel’s First Part attempt to describe a code of honor that could serve as an example for a Spain that was confused by war and by its own technological and social successes. Cervantes applies this code of values to a world in which such values are out of date.

Cervantes also includes social and religious commentary in *Don Quixote.*He bitterly criticizes the class structure in Spain, where outmoded concepts of nobility and property prevailed even as education became more widespread among the lower classes. The arrogance of the Duke and the Duchess in the Second Part highlights how unacceptable Cervantes found these class distinctions to be. Likewise, the prevailing of Sancho and Teresa Panza’s wisdom at the end of the novel is a victory for old-fashioned goodness and wisdom in the face of a world that makes people practical but petty. Finally, Cervantes, who was briefly excommunicated from the Catholic church in 1587, discusses the church in the novel as well. Sancho’s self-identification as an “old Christian,” in particular, informs the new morality he represents.

**Question #3- Is it ok to write material that criticizes your country? Why or why not.**

Art, Duels, Necromancy: The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini

[**JO WALTON**](http://www.tor.com/Jo%20Walton#filter)

Benvenuto Cellini was a [Renaissance goldsmith who became a sculptor](http://www.all-art.org/history230-15-5a.html). He was also a boaster, a braggart, a duelist, and he dabbled in necromancy. His autobiography, written when he was fifty-eight, in 1558, is unfailingly entertaining. It begins: ALL men of whatsoever quality they be, who have done anything of excellence, or which may properly resemble excellence, ought, if they are persons of truth and honesty, to describe their life with their own hand; but they ought not to attempt so fine an enterprise till they have passed the age of forty.

Cellini thinks awfully well of himself, and he has some cause. He was a friend of Michaelangelo, he helped defend the Pope when France attacked Rome, he was sculptor to the king of France and to the first Medici Duke of Florence, and he lived in an age when everyone who has done anything excellent has a duty to write an autobiography.

Renaissance Florence isn’t an alien world, but it might as well be. Cellini is charming and talented, and yet the way he treats women is appalling and he doesn’t even think there’s anything wrong with it. He doesn’t grieve at his father’s death, although he its clear that he loves his father and cares very much about him. He’s also unfailingly violent and revengeful, and his feelings towards the church and the afterlife are not at all what you might expect — and with the necromancy, there’s no acknowledgement that it was wrong, and he just does it because it seems interesting.

The descriptions of the technical and artistic details of making things are always fascinating. This is particularly the case when the things have survived. I was particularly struck with his Ganymede, in the Bargello in Florence. It was a Roman torso, and he fitted legs and arms and an eagle and a head to make a wonderful composite new thing. And isn’t that just the Renaissance all over! But whether he’s making bronzes through the lost wax method or fountains, this is all riveting. You can’t trust him with a block of marble intended for somebody else. But you can trust him to make something excellent out of it.

It’s also interesting to see how young he was independent — he kept getting away from his father and taking up apprenticeships. He also kept getting exiled from Florence for killing people — although he says he was always completely justified. His father wanted him to play the flute, and although Benvenuto wanted to be a craftsman he also wanted to please his father, so he kept going back to it. His apprenticeships with different masters served him well because he learned a lot of different techniques and became flexible and created his own methods.

But here’s a man of no noble blood, living in a world of warring city states, earning a living through his art skills, dealing with patronage and family crises — at one point he has to go back to Florence because his brother in law has died and his sister has six daughters who need dowries. There are plagues and invasions, deaths and lucky escapes, duels and rivals and faithless assistants. There’s enough material for half a dozen fantasy novels, but it’s all real — well, assuming you can take his self-justifications as real.

**Question #4- Would Cellini be someone you would like to meet today?**