

UNIT THREE

Reading poetry demands getting actively involved. The poet Wallace Stevens has written: In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas, and the images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all.

In this unit you will encounter poems on variety of subjects and in a variety of forms. You will also develop strategies for gaining the fullest appreciation of each poem.

It is difficult to study a poem unless you know what you are looking for. By looking for I mean finding what is important in the poem you are studying. The question is the best way of finding that. Therefore, in the unit that follows, you will be provided with a number of questions that you can ask about the poems.

Geoffrey Chaucer (1342 - 1400)

In his own lifetime Geoffrey Chaucer was considered the greatest English poet, and the centuries have not dimmed his reputation, with the single exception of William Shakespeare. His unfinished masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, ranks as one of the world's finest work of literature.

The Prologue

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
When also Zephyrus¹ with his sweet breath

1. The west wind.

Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the Ram¹ has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers² long to seek the stranger strands³
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
And specially, from every shire's end
In England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr⁴, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.
It happened in that season that one day
In Southwark⁵, at The Tabard⁶, as I lay
Ready to go on pilgrimage and start
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,
At night there came into that hostelry
Some nine and twenty in a company
Of sundry folk happening then to fall
In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all
That towards Canterbury meant to ride.
The rooms and stables of the inn were wide;
They made us easy, all was of the best.
And shortly, when the sun had gone to rest,
By speaking to them all upon the trip
I soon was one of them in fellowship
And promised to rise early and take the way
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.

1. Aries, the first sign of the zodiac. The pilgrimage began on April 11, 1387.

2. Pilgrims who wore two crossed palm leaves to show that they had visited the Holy Land.

3. Shores.

4. St. Thomas a Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was murdered in the Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.

5. A suburb of London at the time. 6. An inn.