**Create an outline using the following information.**

**Themes, Motifs & Symbols**

**Themes**

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

**The Pervasiveness of Courtly Love**

The phrase “courtly love” refers to a set of ideas about love that was enormously influential on the literature and culture of the Middle Ages. Beginning with the Troubadour poets of southern France in the eleventh century, poets throughout Europe promoted the notions that true love only exists outside of marriage; that true love may be idealized and spiritual, and may exist without ever being physically consummated; and that a man becomes the servant of the lady he loves. Together with these basic premises, courtly love encompassed a number of minor motifs. One of these is the idea that love is a torment or a disease, and that when a man is in love he cannot sleep or eat, and therefore he undergoes physical changes, sometimes to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Although very few people’s lives resembled the courtly love ideal in any way, these themes and motifs were extremely popular and widespread in medieval and Renaissance literature and culture. They were particularly popular in the literature and culture that were part of royal and noble courts.

Courtly love motifs first appear in *The Canterbury Tales* with the description of the Squire in the General Prologue. The Squire’s role in society is exactly that of his father the Knight, except for his lower status, but the Squire is very different from his father in that he incorporates the ideals of courtly love into his interpretation of his own role. Indeed, the Squire is practically a parody of the traditional courtly lover. The description of the Squire establishes a pattern that runs throughout the General Prologue, and *The Canterbury Tales*: characters whose roles are defined by their religious or economic functions integrate the cultural ideals of courtly love into their dress, their behavior, and the tales they tell, in order to give a slightly different twist to their roles. Another such character is the Prioress, a nun who sports a “Love Conquers All” brooch.

**The Importance of Company**

Many of Chaucer’s characters end their stories by wishing the rest of the “compaignye,” or company, well. The Knight ends with “God save al this faire compaignye” (3108), and the Reeve with “God, that sitteth heighe in magestee, / Save al this compaignye, grete and smale!” (4322–4323). Company literally signifies the entire group of people, but Chaucer’s deliberate choice of this word over other words for describing masses of people, like the Middle English words for party, mixture, or group, points us to another major theme that runs throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. Company derives from two Latin words, *com,* or “with,” and *pane,* or “bread.” Quite literally, a company is a group of people with whom one eats, or breaks bread. The word for good friend, or “companion,” also comes from these words. But, in a more abstract sense, company had an economic connotation. It was the term designated to connote a group of people engaged in a particular business, as it is used today.

The functioning and well-being of medieval communities, not to mention their overall happiness, depended upon groups of socially bonded workers in towns and guilds, known informally as companies. If workers in a guild or on a feudal manor were not getting along well, they would not produce good work, and the economy would suffer. They would be unable to bargain, as a modern union does, for better working conditions and life benefits. Eating together was a way for guild members to cement friendships, creating a support structure for their working community. Guilds had their own special dining halls, where social groups got together to bond, be merry, and form supportive alliances. When the peasants revolted against their feudal lords in 1381, they were able to organize themselves well precisely because they had formed these strong social ties through their companies.

Company was a leveling concept—an idea created by the working classes that gave them more power and took away some of the nobility’s power and tyranny. The company of pilgrims on the way to Canterbury is not a typical example of a tightly networked company, although the five Guildsmen do represent this kind of fraternal union. The pilgrims come from different parts of society—the court, the Church, villages, the feudal manor system. To prevent discord, the pilgrims create an informal company, united by their jobs as storytellers, and by the food and drink the host provides. As far as class distinctions are concerned, they do form a company in the sense that none of them belongs to the nobility, and most have working professions, whether that work be sewing and marriage (the Wife of Bath), entertaining visitors with gourmet food (the Franklin), or tilling the earth (the Plowman).

**The Corruption of the Church**

By the late fourteenth century, the Catholic Church, which governed England, Ireland, and the entire continent of Europe, had become extremely wealthy. The cathedrals that grew up around shrines to saints’ relics were incredibly expensive to build, and the amount of gold that went into decorating them and equipping them with candlesticks and reliquaries (boxes to hold relics that were more jewel-encrusted than kings’ crowns) surpassed the riches in the nobles’ coffers. In a century of disease, plague, famine, and scarce labor, the sight of a church ornamented with unused gold seemed unfair to some people, and the Church’s preaching against greed suddenly seemed hypocritical, considering its great displays of material wealth. Distaste for the excesses of the Church triggered stories and anecdotes about greedy, irreligious churchmen who accepted bribes, bribed others, and indulged themselves sensually and gastronomically, while ignoring the poor famished peasants begging at their doors.

The religious figures Chaucer represents in *The Canterbury Tales* all deviate in one way or another from what was traditionally expected of them. Generally, their conduct corresponds to common medieval stereotypes, but it is difficult to make any overall statement about Chaucer’s position because his narrator is so clearly biased toward some characters—the Monk, for example—and so clearly biased against others, such as the Pardoner. Additionally, the characters are not simply satirical versions of their roles; they are individuals and cannot simply be taken as typical of their professions.

The Monk, Prioress, and Friar were all members of the clerical estate. The Monk and the Prioress live in a monastery and a convent, respectively. Both are characterized as figures who seem to prefer the aristocratic to the devotional life. The Prioress’s bejeweled rosary seems more like a love token than something expressing her devotion to Christ, and her dainty mannerisms echo the advice given by Guillaume de Loris in the French romance *Roman de la Rose,* about how women could make themselves attractive to men. The Monk enjoys hunting, a pastime of the nobility, while he disdains study and confinement. The Friar was a member of an order of mendicants, who made their living by traveling around and begging, and accepting money to hear confession. Friars were often seen as threatening and had the reputation of being lecherous, as the Wife of Bath describes in the opening of her tale. The Summoner and the Friar are at each other’s throats so frequently in *The Canterbury Tales* because they were in fierce competition in Chaucer’s time—summoners, too, extorted money from people.

Overall, the narrator seems to harbor much more hostility for the ecclesiastical officials (the Summoner and the Pardoner) than he does for the clerics. For example, the Monk and the Pardoner possess several traits in common, but the narrator presents them in very different ways. The narrator remembers the shiny baldness of the Monk’s head, which suggests that the Monk may have ridden without a hood, but the narrator uses the fact that the Pardoner rides without a hood as proof of his shallow character. The Monk and the Pardoner both give their own opinions of themselves to the narrator—the narrator affirms the Monk’s words by repeating them, and his own response, but the narrator mocks the Pardoner for his opinion of himself.

**Motifs**

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

**Romance**

The romance, a tale about knights and ladies incorporating courtly love themes, was a popular literary genre in fourteenth-century literature. The genre included tales of knights rescuing maidens, embarking on quests, and forming bonds with other knights and rulers (kings and queens). In particular, the romances about King Arthur, his queen, Guinevere, and his society of “knights of the round table” were very popular in England. In *The Canterbury Tales,* the Knight’s Tale incorporates romantic elements in an ancient classical setting, which is a somewhat unusual time and place to set a romance. The Wife of Bath’s Tale is framed by Arthurian romance, with an unnamed knight of the round table as its unlikely hero, but the tale itself becomes a proto-feminist’s moral instruction for domestic behavior. The Miller’s Tale ridicules the traditional elements of romance by transforming the love between a young wooer and a willing maiden into a boisterous and violent romp.

**Fabliaux**

Fabliaux were comical and often grotesque stories in which the characters most often succeed by means of their sharp wits. Such stories were popular in France and Italy in the fourteenth century. Frequently, the plot turns or climaxes around the most grotesque feature in the story, usually a bodily noise or function. The Miller’s Tale is a prime experiment with this motif: Nicholas cleverly tricks the carpenter into spending the night in his barn so that Nicholas can sleep with the carpenter’s wife; the finale occurs when Nicholas farts in Absolon’s face, only to be burned with a hot poker on his rear end. In the Summoner’s Tale, a wealthy man bequeaths a corrupt friar an enormous fart, which the friar divides twelve ways among his brethren. This demonstrates another invention around this motif—that of wittily expanding a grotesque image in an unconventional way. In the case of the Summoner’s Tale, the image is of flatulence, but the tale excels in discussing the division of the fart in a highly intellectual (and quite hilarious) manner.

**Symbols**

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

**Springtime**

*The Canterbury Tales* opens in April, at the height of spring. The birds are chirping, the flowers blossoming, and people long in their hearts to go on pilgrimages, which combine travel, vacation, and spiritual renewal. The springtime symbolizes rebirth and fresh beginnings, and is thus appropriate for the beginning of Chaucer’s text. Springtime also evokes erotic love, as evidenced by the moment when Palamon first sees Emelye gathering fresh flowers to make garlands in honor of May. The Squire, too, participates in this symbolism. His devotion to courtly love is compared to the freshness of the month of May.

**Clothing**

In the General Prologue, the description of garments, in addition to the narrator’s own shaky recollections, helps to define each character. In a sense, the clothes symbolize what lies beneath the surface of each personality. The Physician’s love of wealth reveals itself most clearly to us in the rich silk and fur of his gown. The Squire’s youthful vanity is symbolized by the excessive floral brocade on his tunic. The Merchant’s forked beard could symbolize his duplicity, at which Chaucer only hints.

**Physiognomy**

Physiognomy was a science that judged a person’s temperament and character based on his or her anatomy. Physiognomy plays a significant role in Chaucer’s descriptions of the pilgrims in the General Prologue. The most exaggerated facial features are those of the peasants. The Miller represents the stereotypical peasant physiognomy most clearly: round and ruddy, with a wart on his nose, the Miller appears rough and therefore suited to rough, simple work. The Pardoner’s glaring eyes and limp hair illustrate his fraudulence.

**Context**

*The Canterbury Tales* is the most famous and critically acclaimed work of Geoffrey Chaucer, a late-fourteenth-century English poet. Little is known about Chaucer’s personal life, and even less about his education, but a number of existing records document his professional life. Chaucer was born in London in the early 1340s, the only son in his family. Chaucer’s father, originally a property-owning wine merchant, became tremendously wealthy when he inherited the property of relatives who had died in the Black Death of 1349. He was therefore able to send the young Geoffrey off as a page to the Countess of Ulster, which meant that Geoffrey was not required to follow in his ancestors’ footsteps and become a merchant. Eventually, Chaucer began to serve the countess’s husband, Prince Lionel, son to King Edward III. For most of his life, Chaucer served in the Hundred Years War between England and France, both as a soldier and, since he was fluent in French and Italian and conversant in Latin and other tongues, as a diplomat. His diplomatic travels brought him twice to Italy, where he might have met Boccaccio, whose writing influenced Chaucer’s work, and Petrarch.

In or around 1378, Chaucer began to develop his vision of an English poetry that would be linguistically accessible to all—obedient neither to the court, whose official language was French, nor to the Church, whose official language was Latin. Instead, Chaucer wrote in the vernacular, the English that was spoken in and around London in his day. Undoubtedly, he was influenced by the writings of the Florentines Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who wrote in the Italian vernacular. Even in England, the practice was becoming increasingly common among poets, although many were still writing in French and Latin.

That the nobles and kings Chaucer served (Richard II until 1399, then Henry IV) were impressed with Chaucer’s skills as a negotiator is obvious from the many rewards he received for his service. Money, provisions, higher appointments, and property eventually allowed him to retire on a royal pension. In 1374, the king appointed Chaucer Controller of the Customs of Hides, Skins and Wools in the port of London, which meant that he was a government official who worked with cloth importers. His experience overseeing imported cloths might be why he frequently describes in exquisite detail the garments and fabric that attire his characters. Chaucer held the position at the customhouse for twelve years, after which he left London for Kent, the county in which Canterbury is located. He served as a justice of the peace for Kent, living in debt, and was then appointed Clerk of the Works at various holdings of the king, including Westminster and the Tower of London. After he retired in the early 1390s, he seems to have been working primarily on *The Canterbury Tales,* which he began around 1387. By the time of his retirement, Chaucer had already written a substantial amount of narrative poetry, including the celebrated romance *Troilus and Criseyde.*

Chaucer’s personal life is less documented than his professional life. In the late 1360s, he married Philippa Roet, who served Edward III’s queen. They had at least two sons together. Philippa was the sister to the mistress of John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster. For John of Gaunt, Chaucer wrote one of his first poems, *The Book of the Duchess,* which was a lament for the premature death of John’s young wife, Blanche. Whether or not Chaucer had an extramarital affair is a matter of some contention among historians. In a legal document that dates from 1380, a woman named Cecily Chaumpaigne released Chaucer from the accusation of seizing her (raptus), though whether the expression denotes that he raped her, committed adultery with her, or abducted her son is unclear. Chaucer’s wife Philippa apparently died in 1387.

Chaucer lived through a time of incredible tension in the English social sphere. The Black Death, which ravaged England during Chaucer’s childhood and remained widespread afterward, wiped out an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the population. Consequently, the labor force gained increased leverage and was able to bargain for better wages, which led to resentment from the nobles and propertied classes. These classes received another blow in 1381, when the peasantry, helped by the artisan class, revolted against them. The merchants were also wielding increasing power over the legal establishment, as the Hundred Years War created profit for England and, consequently, appetite for luxury was growing. The merchants capitalized on the demand for luxury goods, and when Chaucer was growing up, London was pretty much run by a merchant oligarchy, which attempted to control both the aristocracy and the lesser artisan classes. Chaucer’s political sentiments are unclear, for although *The Canterbury Tales* documents the various social tensions in the manner of the popular genre of estates satire, the narrator refrains from making overt political statements, and what he does say is in no way thought to represent Chaucer’s own sentiments.

Chaucer’s original plan for *The Canterbury Tales* was for each character to tell four tales, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. But, instead of 120 tales, the text ends after twenty-four tales, and the party is still on its way to Canterbury. Chaucer either planned to revise the structure to cap the work at twenty-four tales, or else left it incomplete when he died on October 25, 1400. Other writers and printers soon recognized *The Canterbury Tales* as a masterful and highly original work. Though Chaucer had been influenced by the great French and Italian writers of his age, works like Boccaccio’s *Decameron* were not accessible to most English readers, so the format of *The Canterbury Tales,* and the intense realism of its characters, were virtually unknown to readers in the fourteenth century before Chaucer. William Caxton, England’s first printer, published *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1470s, and it continued to enjoy a rich printing history that never truly faded. By the English Renaissance, poetry critic George Puttenham had identified Chaucer as the father of the English literary canon. Chaucer’s project to create a literature and poetic language for all classes of society succeeded, and today Chaucer still stands as one of the great shapers of literary narrative and character.

**Language in The Canterbury Tales**

*The Canterbury Tales* is written in Middle English, which bears a close visual resemblance to the English written and spoken today. In contrast, Old English (the language of Beowulf, for example) can be read only in modern translation or by students of Old English. Students often read *The Canterbury Tales* in its original language, not only because of the similarity between Chaucer’s Middle English and our own, but because the beauty and humor of the poetry—all of its internal and external rhymes, and the sounds it produces—would be lost in translation.

The best way for a beginner to approach Middle English is to read it out loud. When the words are pronounced, it is often much easier to recognize what they mean in modern English. Most Middle English editions of the poem include a short pronunciation guide, which can help the reader to understand the language better. For particularly difficult words or phrases, most editions also include notes in the margin giving the modern versions of the words, along with a full glossary in the back. Several online Chaucer glossaries exist, as well as a number of printed lexicons of Middle English.

**The Order of The Canterbury Tales**

Nobody knows exactly in what order Chaucer intended to present the tales, or even if he had a specific order in mind for all of them. Eighty-two early manuscripts of the tales survive, and many of them vary considerably in the order in which they present the tales. However, certain sets of tales do seem to belong together in a particular order. For instance, the General Prologue is obviously the beginning, then the narrator explicitly says that the Knight tells the first tale, and that the Miller interrupts and tells the second tale. The introductions, prologues, and epilogues to various tales sometimes include the pilgrims’ comments on the tale just finished, and an indication of who tells the next tale. These sections between the tales are called *links,* and they are the best evidence for grouping the tales together into ten fragments. But *The Canterbury Tales* does not include a complete set of links, so the order of the ten fragments is open to question. *The Riverside Chaucer* bases the order of the ten fragments on the order presented in the Ellesmere manuscript, one of the best surviving manuscripts of the tale. Some scholars disagree with the groupings and order of tales followed in *The Riverside Chaucer,* choosing instead to base the order on a combination of the links and the geographical landmarks that the pilgrims pass on the way to Canterbury.