

## **The Prologue To Canterbury Tales : A Portrait Gallery Of Fourteenth Century Society**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the prominent figure in the history of English literature. Sometimes regarded as The Father Of English Literature, it was Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales which brought recognition to the English language. The popularity of Canterbury tales has still not faded. The Prologue To Canterbury Tales is ranked among the best prologues in the literary history. The Prologue To Canterbury Tales stands out to be master piece creation by Geoffrey Chaucer. No other prologue by any writer gained such popularity that The Prologue To Canterbury Tales has attained. Different critics of different times have shown their particular interest in The prologue To Canterbury Tales and marked it as the portrait gallery of fourteenth century. A variety of aspects of the society are remarkably depicted in The prologue. A number of characters, each a part of society and laid out the ways of the society. Nevill Coghill writes

"In all literature there is nothing that touches or resembles The Prologue. It is a precise portrait of an entire nation, high and low, old and young, male and female, lay and clerical, learned and ignorant, rogue and righteous, land and sea, town and country but without extremes. Apart from stunning clarity, touched with nuance of the character presented, the most noticeable thing about them is their normality. They are the perennial progeny of men and women. Sharply individuals, together they make a party"

The Prologue To The Canterbury Tales reveals Chaucer's original plan of Canterbury tales. The thirty or more pilgrimage, one destination, the concept of common place, the contest of stories and everything is well explained in The prologue.

**Keywords:** Prologue, Variety, Portrait, Pilgrimage, contest.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a painter spreads colours on the canvas Chaucer draws a magnificent sketch of the society. By applying a multiple character scheme he touched almost every corner of the society. The Prologue To Canterbury Tales is full of a variety of portraits representing the medieval society. The first portrait that I feel worth mentioning is the portrait of the language of the masses. As we go through the text the first thing that we find that it is not the modern English. But still if we give it repeated two or three readings it becomes apprehensive. At that time English was not so reputed language but the language of the common folk. Chaucer dare

to write in a language that was not the language of elites but spoken by the masses. This is considered as a step to give strength to English language.

The Prologue begins with the detailing of April's month. It marks the return of mild weather after winter and an ideal weather to go on pilgrimage. The people of Chaucer's age passed their winter inside the dark, draughty, badly heated, smoky huts, surviving on salted beef, smoked bacon, dried peas and beans etc. A shortage of food and unhealthy conditions lead to occurrence of several diseases. Therefore April showers made the grass green again and both men and cattle were delighted in the expectation of fresh food and recovery of good health. This makes April a perfect weather to go on a pilgrimage. The detailing of the season is beautifully drawn by the Chaucer and he also gives a logical support.

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote  
The droghte of Marche hath persed to the roote  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendered is the flour  
Whan zepirus eek with his sweet breeth

The very first live character Chaucer has chosen to describe first in the prologue is of The Knight. He perhaps judges The Knight as the higher hierarchical order of society so begins with him. He is shown as a model of excellence. A well behaved, well cultured, a type of chivalry, gallant in battles, full of dignity and simplicity. His rough tunic and coat of mail symbolises simplicity. Chaucer praises The Knight's love for truth and honesty. He is an epitome of honour. His maiden like shy manners and lack of liveliness individualises him. His relevance is being challenged in the age of declining chivalry. Chaucer's description also employs few strokes from the brush of irony. In contrast to The Knight his son totally believes in pleasures and adventures of life. A stylish and youthful and lusty youngman is far away from the Christian motives of his father. With his curled locks and embroidered gown he looks stunning but again Chaucer feels the waste of money on expensive dress should go to the poor.

Chaucer's approach in depicting the characters is realistic. Realism is a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or reflecting faithfully an actual way of life. In The Prologue To Canterbury Tales characters seem real. No sort of exaggeration is shown and wrote what he saw. The description of manners and appearance of characters provides genuinity and reveals the ways and trends of the age. Hazlitt observes:

"There is not artificial, pompous display, but a strict parsimony of the poet's material like the rude simplicity of the age in which he lives"

The monk if we imagine belongs to noble class but Chaucer's description lays down original image of corruption in the church. Instead of his inclination towards the church The monk is more inclined to worldly pleasures. He loves hunting, loves drinking and leads a luxurious life. He was supposed to be a great follower of Christianity but he is a corrupt person who refrains from prayers, studies and manual labour.

The Doctor of physic is also shown as an immoral person whose chief aim is to mint money only. The medical practice of that time was based on science and astrology. Chaucer ironically

reveals his greed for gold which should have been used in medicines. The most of money he has made is from the Black Death, a bubonic plague spread during medieval times. So it becomes clear the characters of Chaucer are individuals as well as types. Maurice Hussey in his book *Chaucer's World: A Pictorial Companion* gave the detailed demo that how each character represents his class.

Among the various portraits one of important sketch to discuss is of The Friar. He was supposed to follow the teachings of Christ, perform good deeds and spread the words of Christianity. As per conventions he had to make his living via begging. But among Friars begging emerged as a flourishing business. Since they could collect ecclesiastical taxes and could hear confessions, they made a lot of money illegally. He was more indulged in immoral sexual activities. His lifestyle was as of a rich man but profession of a Friar who earns from begging. The Friar possesses a sharp white neck and he has habit of lispings which signals towards his sexual inclinations. By using expensive gifts and showing his richness he seduced women. One more thing that made him attractive his ability to sing. Later he found husbands for women and dowries for them. Playing on piety of poor people he took advantages. His opulent dressing during court days individualises him.

The Merchant represents a rich class which is powerful too. The business of import and export made this class to accumulate a lot of wealth. He always boasts of his wealth and profits. Although he was in debts now but he maintained his financial reputations. His dressing sense and appearance is depicted with fine keenness by Chaucer. Expensive clothes, clasped boots and a hat are clear indications of his rich status. Chaucer also exposes his foul practices like an expert i.e. usury and illegal dealing of foreign exchange.

So the portraits of Chaucer are types as well as individuals. In the words of William Blake,

“Of Chaucer’s characters, as described in his *Canterbury Tales*, some of names or titles are altered by time but the characters themselves forever remain unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which nature never steps. Names alter, things never alter. I have known multitudes of those who have been monks in the age of monkery, who in this deistical age are deists. As Newton numbered the stars, and as Linneus numbered the plants, so Chaucer numbered the classes of men”. So a kind of universality is visible in his portraits.

Chaucer’s portraits are real and authentic this is evident. He not only drawn corrupt characters but also worked on Good characters. The clerk is a poor and honest scholar. He is poor because he spends all his money on books. He eats less because he wants to save for books. He is sincere and full of wisdom. His studies are devoted to the study of logic chiefly to Aristotle and his philosophies. In description of Clerk’s portrait Chaucer plays with words when he says that clerk’s philosophy did not give him gold.

The Parson is a poor but honest person. In *The Prologue To Canterbury Tales* Chaucer has all the praises for him. He honestly preaches gospels and practices, helps the poor and truly follows the teachings of his religion. According to Chaucer, he was rich not because of money but of holy thoughts. He represents a class of learned men like clerk. The parson is so kind hearted he pays the taxes of poor parishioners out of his pocket. In this way he doesn’t disobey his duty either. As it was his duty to collect the taxes.

In the same row there was Parson's brother the plowman who is also portrayed by Chaucer sympathetically. He like his brother is an honest and hardworking man. The Plowman is a representative of peasant class who pays his tithes to the church and lives a peaceful life. His tabbard smock reflects his poverty. An example of dignity of labour, also reflects rustic life. He is ready to help the poor and labours for them in difficult times without taking a penny in turn.

So much of variety of characters lets Legouis to call The Prologue To Canterbury Tales "A veritable picture gallery". Another critic Arthur Hoffman observes various characters in The Prologue To Canterbury Tales, like figures in a tapestry.

Chaucer's art of characterisation is amusing as well. He linked external appearance of summoner with the corruption in his soul and mind. A totally unattractive man, red complexion, face full of pimples, boils and skin infected with scales. His habit of drinking and love for garlic and leeks result in bad breath. He can spare people's crime at the cost of few quarts of wine and keeps blackmailing them for long. He regularly keeps people exploiting as he knew their secrets.

A touch of fiction is also obvious in certain portraits of Chaucer, prominent one is of Wife of Bath. The wife of Bath is much talked character of The Canterbury Tales. She is the most memorable among all the pilgrims. A five times married still preparing for sixth one is perfect symbol of authority and experience. Chaucer's inspiration behind this portrait is said to be La Vieille of Roman de la rose. She is described as unfashionably dressed, loves to travel, lusty and more importantly she is deaf and her teeth were set apart. Professionally a weaver but not good in her profession. Chaucer also satirises her weaving skills.

Mathew Arnold points out about the Chaucer "His view of life is large, free, simple, clear and kindly". He marked him as "Perpetual fountain of good sense". In every portrait he breathed a sense. In every description there was a liveliness. The portrait of Nun is so neatly and cleanly depicted like we are witnessing her. The elaboration of her table manners, dressing skills and love for food are simply phenomenal. The touch of irony is almost everywhere. The nun who was supposed to eat little, live with simplicity but by describing her table manners and love jewellery Chaucer is mocking her. Chaucer gives us minute and delicate records of details in dress, behaviour, which makes it a mime of observation as from the portrait of prioress:

She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,  
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe,  
Wel koude she carie a morse, and wel kepe,  
That no drope no fille upon hir brest,

There are a number of characters the Cook, The Knight's Yeoman, The lawyer, The Franklin, The five Guildsmen, The Shipman and so on. Every character has something of interest, entertaining and engaging. In the words of Dryden "Here is God's plenty." The thirty or so pilgrims are in fact, a fair sample of society in general with the exception of the nobility that wouldn't join package tour and the poorest labourer who could not afford to go. Here we have the representatives of Church and laity, country men and townsmen, the professions, commerce and the military. In this range and sweep of characterisation, Chaucer may well be compared with Shakespeare and Dickens.

Chaucer's vivid cast gives him opportunity to speak in various voices. A becomes the mouthpiece and provides a real picture of his age with its minute details. He is in true sense a social chronicler of England.

## CONCLUSION

The General Prologue To Canterbury Tales establishes the frame of the Canterbury Tales. It serves as an introduction to The Canterbury Tales and introduces the characters. The characters are introduced in terms of their ranks in the three medieval social states, the clergy, the nobility and the commoners and peasantry. It is rightly remarked by various critics as a portrait gallery of the fourteenth century and medieval times. The manners of the characters are the manners of the society and in context to the social backgrounds, historical backgrounds and cultural is undoubtedly a mirror of the age. The characters in the Prologue are picture gallery with their sharp images and colours, designed unity, typical features, distinguishing details and are of a universal significance. While reading The prologue it appears to us a real picture of contemporary England, excepting nobility and the labour class. Chaucer's did this effortlessly without any intention but as said by Raymond William Literature is a highly aware and articulate record of individual experience within a culture.

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