Chaucer’s Role In The Canterbu Essay, Research Paper

Chaucer s Role in the Canterbury Tales:

A Narrator and a Poet

Is Geoffrey Chaucer an actual character on this infamous journey to Canterbury? This is a thought that seems to be somewhat over looked when most read Chaucer s The Canterbury Tales. As the writer of the Tales, Chaucer took the opportunity to invent a character to represent him. However, does this narrator truly represent what Chaucer is trying to get a cross? Or is he a ploy to gain the attention of the readers without stirring a controversy? This question can be answered in numerous ways, but the text seems to support the idea that Chaucer, as witty and clever as he was, uses him as both.

To most readers, it would make sense that Chaucer expresses his own views by being the narrator of his stories, but this is not entirely true. During the time period of which The Canterbury Tales takes place, it was not a wise thing to do to write works that mock the church, or what the average person believes. Thus, it is highly possible that Chaucer used the narrator to tone down his thoughts, but still cause the readers mind to turn. Meanwhile, Chaucer still has the ability to create a character that is above the other pilgrims who looks down at them in a satirical way, without causing too much of a conflict with the beliefs of those who will most likely be reading it. It was his pose to regard himself with a mild mockery. (Nevill Coghill)

In the General Prologue , the narrator (Chaucer) introduces some nine and twenty pilgrims who will be voyaging to Canterbury. Chaucer ridicules all of these characters. The content of their characters, nobility, and honesty is questioned in each introduction. It is made obvious that Chaucer gives an unbiased description of each by being honest with his statements and only stating the facts. He is our eyes; we rely on him to give us an accurate description of the characters without bias, (Baylor, Jeffery). This is Chaucer the pilgrim. Chaucer the poet does not have to agree with what he describes and in an enigmatic way mocks those that he described throughout the tales. It is debated as to why Chaucer goes so far as to side with the monk in the following lines, but he is not siding with the monk s life style at all. He is not in favor of what the monk does with his power, but he agrees to the fact that the monk should question the laws of which he abides by, or tries to abide by:

And I agreed and said his views were sound;

Was he to study til his head went round

Poring over books in cloisters? (Lines 188-190 The General Prologue)

These lines in no way say that Chaucer is accepting the decisions of the monk, but simply agrees that he should not spend his days studying in the monastery when there are new things to be learned outside of it, which no one has attempted to do before.

The description of the narrator is another example of a witty self-parody in Chaucer s work. The poet himself appears in person as a plump simpleton, (Nevill Coghill). Chaucer has the Host describe him as a slight and meek character, certainly not a flattering description. This shows that Chaucer wishes to remain in the shadows. He does not want to be noticed and would rather sit back and watch as the others bury and embarrass themselves without even noticing it. In that respect, Chaucer shows that while the reader is getting entertainment out of it, so is the narrator, Chaucer himself. The Host says to the narrator:

What man are you? said he,

You look as if you were trying to find a hare,

Scanning the ground with such a steady stare!

Come near, man, look up, look merrily!

Make room there gentlemen, let this man have place!

He s shaped about the waste the same as me;

He d be a likely poppet to embrace

For any woman, small and fair of face!

There s something elvish in his countenance;

He never speaks a word in diallance. (Lines 5-14 in The Words of the Host to Chaucer)

These words the Host says to Chaucer before his tale, give the only description of the narrator s appearance throughout all the tales. In these few lines one can infer that the narrator is a simple man, who stays behind observing. Most of the other pilgrims had forgotten he is there, if it had not been for the obnoxiousness of the Host, they would have kept on forgetting. Although Chaucer seems to portray his character as quiet and boring, there is much to him.

After the Host says these things to the narrator, it is his turn to give a tale. He chooses The Tale of Sir Topaz . This tale has been said by many to be boring and out of place, however it adds to the development of Chaucer s character. The Tale of Sir Topaz is a comically terrible tale meant strictly as a parody to Middle English romances. In its singsong rhyme scheme it resembles oral literature told in song and in its content it effectively mirrors the mechanics of adventure tales told in Chaucer s England. The tale includes all of the elements of a romance: a dashing knight, mystical creatures, and fearsome monsters. However, Chaucer takes these elements and makes them exaggerated and nonsensical. It is an act of mercy for the reader when the Host finally interrupts the narrator and forces him to conclude.

In actuality, The Tale of Sir Topaz is a fantastical poem that serves only to annoy the other pilgrims. That s good, he said well take your place; It should be dainty judging by your face, (lines 20-21 of The Host s words to Chaucer) stresses the idea that the pilgrims were expecting an enjoyable tale, based only on his looks. Chaucer seems to become angry with this, and gives a mind-numbing tale just to upset them. To think of this clever way to express his abhorrence for the pilgrims he is forced to travel with once again shows Chaucer s true intention through this narrator. After he is rudely interrupted, by the Host, and told that his story was horrible, Chaucer (the narrator) goes on to tell The Tale of Melibee , a tale that goes on for some thousand lines or so. This tale is an enormous contradiction to the one he had previously started. It is an extremely serious tale of vengeance and spouse submission with no humor.

The Tale of Melibee is an exceedingly dull tale told in a dry prose format that serves as an obvious reaction to the Host s distaste for the florid poetry of The Tale of Sir Topaz. It is in this quality to the tale that is most interesting, for the tale itself is devoid of any narrative thrust or real character development. The Tale of Melibee is an earnest and noble telling of one woman s capacity for forgiveness, but the tale is bogged down in ponderous discussions concerning how Melibee should deal with his enemies. Even in the question of how Melibee should deal with his enemies, there is no drama, for the tale transforms the decision into an academic debate rather than a narrative point. That the tale is unsatisfying and not particularly noteworthy is certainly Chaucer s intention, for the tale fits in with the narrative push of the entire structure of the tales. Chaucer thus sacrifices the literary qualities of this particular tale to serve the larger structure of The Canterbury Tales. In simpler words, he is stooping to the level of the other pilgrims, in order to mock them in a cagey way.

To conclude this thought is not an easy task, for the clever Chaucer had unlimited examples of his self-parody throughout his Canterbury Tales. Chaucer has created several depictions of himself in order to get his satirical point across. At the conclusion of his tales, Chaucer prints a retraction:

Now I beg all those that listen to this little treatise, or read it, that if there be anything in it that pleases them, they thank our lord Jesu Christ for it, from who proceeds all understanding and goodness.

And if there be anything that displeases them I beg them also to impute it to fault of my want and ability, and not to my will, who would have very gladly have said better if I had the power.

It is in these lines that Chaucer admits his intentions; to show the corruptness of his society through a highly deceitful work. He understands what it is that he has done, and asks for an almost apology from those who are offended, but admits that he cannot help how he thinks. Chaucer s character is the messenger of his views and should not be over looked for it is through him that all of Chaucer s opinions are reflected.