Discuss Chaucer S Approach To The Problem Essay, Research Paper

In the The Pardoner s Prologue and Tale Chaucer s approach to evil and death are most apparent. Chaucer shows the Pardoner as being evil in all his actions. In the introduction of the book, Chaucer: The Pardoner s Prologue and Tale s valid information is given as to how Pardoners were seen in Chaucer s time. They were seen as quite evil. Pardoners plotted their evil deeds under the good name of the church. Chaucer leaves it to the Pardoner himself, to tell the reader exactly what a scoundrel he is.

In the Prologue, Chaucer s Pardoner tells us that he preaches in churches and that he always preaches the same sermon, which he knows by heart, on the text “Radix malorum est cupitidas which means Greed is the root of evils”. Later in the Pardoner s Tale Chaucer shows evil in work and death as the result of this greed.

The evil pardoner has an under-handed relic-business that, he boasts, brings him a hundred marks a year in private income. Therefore, by playing on the tenderest fears and feelings of his congregation, by terrorism, hypocrisy, cajolery, bribery, and blackmail, the Pardoner got as much money that could be coaxed or torn from the poor and superstitious. The Pardoner has composed this wonderfully powerful Tale (sermon) in such a way as to move his hearers to the utmost. Only his motivation in doing this is not love (a desire to save them from their sins) but vice (a desire to make them anxious so that they give him much money).

Chaucer portrays the idea that the Pardoner s solitary aim for preaching is to get people’s money. This can been seen when he says, For myn entente is nat but for to wyne,/ And no thyng for correction of synne. (403-404).

The Pardoner expresses total indifference to the fate of their souls in a mocking reference to eternal damnation as ‘goon a blackeberyed’. The only other reason he has for preaching is hatred: to attack and defame someone who has dared insult him.

The Pardoner explains that avarice is his own vice and at the same time the vice he preaches against with such powerful effect may cause people to repent of their avarice sincerely. Chaucer portrays him as being so cold hearted that he does not care if he takes from very poor people, so that their children starve, so long as he can enjoy himself. This can be seen in the following lines 447 to 453:

I wol none of the Apostles countrefete;

I wol have moneye, wolle, chese, and whete,

Al were it yeven o fthe povereste page,

Or of the povereste widwe in a village,

Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne.

Nay, I wol drynke licour of the vyne

And have a joly wenche in every toun.

As the Tale begins, he preaches not only against love of money as such, but attacks all the ‘tavern sins’ of drunkenness, swearing, and gambling. He attempts to illustrate that the end of such deeds is death.

The pardoner makes reference to death in line 491 when he says To sleen the Baptist John, ful giltelees. There he draws reference to the John the Baptist s death by the order of Herod. Herod was drunk and had been indulging in one of the vices spoken of in this tale, drunkenness. It was this vice that allowed him to make such a poor decision. (Priestley 102) Death, he makes it clear, is the result of indulging in vice. He also says that people who live in vices are really dead, this can be seen when he says, But certes, he that haunteth swiche delices/ Is ful of stryvyng and of wrecchednesse. (447-448)

Later on Chaucer mentions Attila, the great conqueror, who died in his sleep with shame and dishonor, bleeding at the nose in drunkenness. Again, it is shown that there is no honour to be gained by indulging in vices. It is even worse when death meets you and you are in this state of dissolution. This can be seen in the following lines, Loooke, Attila, the grete conquerour,/ Dyede in his sleep with shame and dishonour,/ Bledyng at his nose in dronkenesse. (579-581)

Then in the beginnings of the tale the three rioters see a corpse being carried by and they find out that the person was slain that night, dead drunk. Ther cam a privee theef men clepeth Deeth,/ That in this contree al the peple sleeth, The man who is carrying the corpse goes on to warn the rioters of Death and calls it an adversary. He also told them to look for it at all times and to be ready to meet it at any time. Chaucer uses personification here as he portrays Death as a person. He approaches death from the angle of an enemy that one must always be aware of and in wait for. (unknown Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia)

The rioters say that they will slay death in line 699 And we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth. If they can catch Death they will kill him. Here it is seen how Death is again portrayed as a person. It is an entity that may be found if it is sought after!

The rioters then come face to face with the Old Man at the stile who longs to die (because his life is over and his conscience is at peace), who chides the rioters for their violent language and insulting attitude towards him. Then he prays that God will bring them repentance. Then one of them asks the Old Man to show them where Death can be found. The Old Man then directs them toward the grove where, he says, Death awaits them.

When the rioters see the gold they forget that it was Death that they were in search of and that they were really supposed to find there, this can be seen in line 772 when he says, Ne lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte. However they did not realize that death was in fact awaiting them. They allowed greed to catch them off guard. In fact the greed caught them off guard but it was in this way that Chaucer shows that vice leads to death. They forgot death in their haste to gain all that they could have and they all died. The way that this story develops attests to Chaucer s sense of irony. The three rioters have decided to split the treasure that they found. However greed led to the planning of the youngest rioter s death.

Chaucer portrays the youngest rioter in such a way that the reader may feel pity for him initially; one hears the older men callously planning his death, one of the rioters plans to stab the youngest rioter when he get back on both of his sides, while the other rioter distracts him, and then he too will stab him. This can be seen in the following lines, And I shal ryve hym thurgh the sydes tweye / Whil that thou strogelest with hym as in game,/ And with they daggere looks thou do the same; (428-430). It is shocking when Chaucer reveals the youngest rioter to be as evil as they are, for he was planning their deaths too. He purchased some rat poison and mixed it in with their wine. This can be seen in lines 845 when he says, Putte in his thoought that he sholde poyson beye, and in line 850 when he says, To sleen hem bothe, and never to repene. And then in lines 872 to 873 when he says, And in the two his poyson poured he;/ The thriddle he kepte clene for his drynke. When he reached back they slew him and then they drank the wine and both died instantly.

Death is a key component in Chaucer s treatment, because it makes possible the idea of an adventure. It stimulates the drunken, gambling rioters to swear they will seek out Death and slay him. However, the rioters find Death without knowing it and he slays them instead.

The Pardoner preaches avarice is the root of all evil. Like the Holy Writ he seeks in his sermons to show that the wages of sin is death. It never seems to hit home to the Pardoner that he too will probably die as a result of his treachery. Thus he continues to sin by trying to sell some of his relics to his listeners. Chaucer makes a big mockery of the pardoner and his life style by showing the deceit and the double twist of his life and preaching. Chaucer approaches death as the natural consequence of a life of greed and vice. He speaks out against evil in a clever way so as to reach his audience without making them feel as if they are being lectured to. In the same way, he speaks out about the state of society pronouncing his judgment upon them all.

In the medieval society, existing alongside the Church was the complicated feudal system based on landholding. Nobody owned land independently but only as a vassal of an overlord, who in turn owed allegiance either to some great noble or to the king himself. The system was really an elaborate chain of loyalties, with rent, so to speak, paid principally in military service to the overlord. As the town grew, the craftsmen and tradesmen organized themselves in guilds, which decided wages and prices, insisted upon good standard of material and workmanship, regulated terms of apprenticeship for the particular craft or trade. Indeed not only apprenticeship but almost everything in medieval society including the clothing a man wore, was regulated and carefully ordered.

Everybody knew his/her place in this society. Men of humble birth might be promoted to positions of great power and influence only in the church. If we suddenly found ourselves members of such a society we should undoubtedly feel that much of our personal freedom had been taken away from us. Because it was essentially a society with a secure religious foundation, there were, however, some compensations. For example, as we see in Chaucer people belonging to very different classes could quite happily go on a pilgrimage together, in a way that would have been unusual in later periods. Men had rights as well as particular obligations and responsibilities of their rank or class. There was less downright brutal tyranny than there was in the centuries that followed the Middle Ages.