

The element of satire  
with respect to  
Chaucer's ?c



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## CANTERBURY TALES? THESIS:

## THE ELEMENT OF SATIRE WITH RESPECT TO CHAUCER'S "CANTERBURY TALES"

It is human nature to laugh when an event goes wrong or to make a mockery of an all too serious person. But what if authors had the power to use this instinct within humans to drive a point across? In fact they do and they call this literary tool satire. Many authors have used this tool as a backbone in their writings; others have only managed to throw in elements of satire here and there. However, there was one author who had mastered this literary tool, and who could use it to the extremes. He had the ability to use it as playfully and lightheartedly as if to just tease. But, in an instant, he could use it to denigrate a person and ruin all that was left of their self-dignity. His name was Geoffrey Chaucer and his weapon of choice, satire.

Satire is one of the most effective ways of writing. It allows the writer to use his imagination to the fullest and be as malicious as he deems necessary, yet not cause the reader to leave in disgust (Hight 242). Satire is a form of literature that readers expect to find some form of profound ideas. However, with satire comes a variation of the truth. While satire is grounded in truth, it is a tainted form. Distorted by the writer as a way of expressing an idea (Hight 234).

It is not quite certain where the origins of satire started, but most believe that it was the Romans to first coin the term satire (Hight 24). Satura, meaning dish of mixed ingredients (HTTP://WWW. GALENET.

COM/SERVLET/DC). Two men that could be credited with the title of "The Grandfathers of Satire" are the Roman poets Horace and Lucilius who wrote

volumes of poetry, which included their own views on world politics, social fads, and the characters of their friends (Highet 24).

Now, one must ask oneself why would an author choose to write in satire? Possibly it was personal grudges (Highet 238). Or another reason may be to state an ideal. In this case, the satire is not just to belittle a particular idea, but also to send a warning as an example (Highet 243). Other reasons for a satirist include, their personal feeling of inferiority or the desire to better society (Highet 240-241).

Chaucer was as straightforward as a man can get (Wagenknecht 72). He saw the world as a down to earth fellow who was regarded as "sweet" (Wagenknecht 141). Being the son of a vintner (victuallers were the peace party), he did not approve of war except that with a religious cause (Wagenknecht 56). It is said that Chaucer "would naturally take and present the most unfavorable view of the clerical body, and a correspondingly favorable one of the military" (Wagenknecht 56). This is why he is so critical of the Pardoner and Summoner who represent the church. This also explains why he holds the Knight with such high regard.

Even though Chaucer wrote with much vulgarity towards the church it is important to note that Chaucer was indeed religious and a Christian at that (Wagenknecht 130). This becomes more evident when looking at how he satirizes the Wife of Bath in the following lines:

From the Wife of Bath's general prologue

In the whole parish there was not a woman

Who dared precede her at the almsgiving,

And if there did, so furious was she,  
That she was put out of all charity. (Wright 27)

These lines illustrate how the Wife of Bath seems to be the first at the altar, and if she is not she becomes jealous of the other women. The Wife of Bath tends to represent herself as a woman who uses sex as a means of taking in husbands then holding them for their money, land, or even titles (Wagenknecht 99). Chaucer sees these faults clearly, and his saturations become a criticism, which hold that of Christian morals and principles (Wagenknecht 99).

Though Chaucer was a man of religious standards he is also a man of tolerance (Wagenknecht 61). He knew all too well that he was, in fact, not perfect. And when he chooses to satirize the