

# Characterization in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

Literature



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Good characters mean that your storyline is good; you have the original and novel angle. When a wide range of readers would like to spend their precious time, it means you have worthwhile characters. The central character needs to have such force and versatility that it is easily possible for you to identify traits about which you strongly feel and admire. For that your central character needs to be totally believable and fully developed. The character needs to grow and develop during the course of the story. What is the world that you are going to create? Your characters need to fit in there naturally.

Then only the readers will enthusiastically turn the pages of the book even before they know the story and the full import of the character. 'What will happen to this character?' -- should be the normal question in the mind of the reader and that question should remain till the end. How the overall development of the character progresses? Is the pacing, the inbuilt tension sufficient for the subsequent build-up or does it flag in places? What are the dramatic highlights of the character? Do you have sufficient set-piece scenes, the believable ones? Whether the portrayal is out of date which diminishes the enthusiasm of the reader?

Are you causing confusion to the reader with too many twists and turns and whether your plot strands are too complicated? The stakes are high for the central character. Apart from the inbuilt strength of the central character, several ancillary characters need to catch up with it and such a relationship is expected to be willingly accepted by the readers. The confrontation or conciliation between the characters needs to contribute to the total effect and the final outcome of the story. One important question! Is the title of the

book relates to a big dramatic question that is the core issue in the book? If not, it is necessary to inject one.

If it is possible for you to sum up the storyline in one sentence, most probably you are on the threshold of success. You indeed have a big dramatic question. While taking decision about your main and subsidiary characters, you need to have an adequate study in the market about the comparable books on the subject. How do you stand apart from them? —this is an important question, that must engage your attention. Apart from the total merit of the book, have your characters succeeded in creating sufficient expectation in the minds of the readers about your writing efforts? You need to do this probably within the first ten pages.

To put it in other words, you must create an urge in the heart and mind of the readers to move to the next page and the process should go on till the epilogue. Having finished reading the novel, the characters move with the readers. Good characters establish a permanent, lifelong place with them. They leave deep impressions. Some of them change the perspective of the life of the readers. Therefore, you find some of the characters have become historical and continue to enliven the readers since thousands of years. The importance of characters, therefore, can not be overemphasized. Chaucer, the 14th century genius writer:

Then genre of Christian literature was a predominant force in English literature during the Middle and till the nineteenth century. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a major work of Christian literature. Chaucer's work and his characters show the Roman Catholic influence in his native England. The author's direct participation and involvement is seen in <https://assignbuster.com/characterization-in-chaucers-canterbury-tales/>

the action of the storyline. Writing and publishing had limitations in Chaucer's era. The Printing Press was not there. Since the author makes use of imagery, mainly religious, the work was enjoyed by a select few during his time. The mass production commenced in the year 1500.

The tactics and strategies employed by Chaucer to chisel out his characters are unique and befitting to the era to which he belonged. The influence of the Roman Catholic Church on the society and the Rulers was deep and profound, and the people were sermonized that achievement of salvation for the communal soul was more important than salvation for the individual soul. Minus, the religious aura, this is also the dominant principle of communism. This idea of the communal soul is propounded by examining the people collected for the pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket. The men and women assembled belong to all strata of the society.

Their social status and occupations are varied. " Chaucer often juxtaposes two characters who are seemingly polar opposites, such as the noble Knight and the dishonest Miller, and places the tales that they tell side by side. In the hierarchy of the pilgrimage, each member of the party is equal in that everyone is required to tell a unique tale.... Chaucer suggests that the value of the group - and perhaps of society or 'Christendom' as a whole - is more important in the course of salvation than any one individual soul. " (Chaucer... ) About The Canterbury Tales: It is a collection of stories, between 1387 and 1400.

A group of thirty people travel as pilgrims to Canterbury. They hail from all layers of the society. They tell stories to each other. Chaucer had the story telling schedule cut out for them. Each will tell two stories on way to <https://assignbuster.com/characterization-in-chaucers-canterbury-tales/>

Canterbury and two on the way back. Chaucer detailed methods of telling the story—he gives that responsibility to the pilgrims and when they began to tell stories, they admit to their personal flaws. Chaucer does not spare his own self. He is portrayed as an imperfect being in many ways. This is the unique attempt of Chaucer to enable the readers to identify with the characters.

The pilgrims share their stories to enable them to advance to their true destination of Heavenly Jerusalem. This strategy is employed by Chaucer to make his readers to join the communal quest for salvation. Chaucer employs different methods to reveal the identity of his characters. For example, the Wife of Bath is described as follows: “‘ Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed’. The fact that she wears red stockings suggests that she is unchaste and lascivious. Likewise, the Franklin carries a silk purse on his journey, which implies his desire for wealth and fine things. In both cases, the character's 'baggage' is his or her 'sin'.

Each of the pilgrims reveals, either through their outward appearance or in the telling of their tales, the burden of sin that he or she must forsake before gaining entrance into Heavenly Jerusalem. Chaucer, again, invites the reader to identify with the members of the misfit pilgrimage; every individual, both in the story and in the reading audience, has his own unique cross to bear. “(Chaucer...) Geoffrey (pseudo-persona for Chaucer): Among the diverse group of pilgrims, a calm and unassuming person by the name Geoffrey enters to tell the story of Sir Thopas. His tale is marked as the best in the Canterbury sequence.

Not for its contents, but for other reasons. The contents of the tale do not provide you with the specific moral, through Geoffrey's character Chaucer achieves his objective—the illustration that learning is an auditory phenomenon. Geoffrey is presented as an objective observer. The character is developed as if to say, 'talk less and walk more.' It is to listen than engage in endless talk to defend one. Every argument has a counter argument, and you can not subdue your opponent, by arguments alone. Pilgrims who travel in a group must have the source of entertainment and this aspect is taken care of by Chaucer in his peculiar style.

The story line takes a dig at the knightly traditions. What happens when a giant approaches a knight who does not know anything about chivalry? The knight replies that tomorrow he is going to offer the challenge, as he has not brought the armor. What sort of a knight he is who journeys through the forest without the armor! The knight makes a fool of himself. The audience during the medieval times would have liked such parodies immensely. By introducing Geoffrey as a cover, Chaucer is able to speak freely, without owning the responsibility for any adverse criticism for his opinions.

The best story establishes a connection between the story teller and the reader and that objective is totally achieved by Chaucer via Geoffrey. "In addition to the character himself, Geoffrey is specifically associated with the Tale of Sir Thopas because it helps Chaucer to display of his ability to compose great literature by doing the exact opposite. For a master like Chaucer who has developed the ability to write well over time, it must be increasingly difficult to conjure up a horrible piece of literature"(Patel, 2001)

More about the Knight: The knight assumes another dimension in 'A Knight Ther Was.'

"The knight is a medieval soldier. What kind of a profession was it? What are the origins? Where do the religious elements come from?... does he display the old, decayed, lost hopes of a Christian World that never saw its dreams of conquering the Holy Land and converting heathens realized? Does he also represent a European Military Culture that never comprehended the paradox of its rather un-Christian hatred for non-Christian peoples?" {Lambdin (Editor), Lambdin (Editor) 1999}. Now Chaucer is speaking like a serious sociologist, political thinker, historian and an analyst of religious doctrines.

Summoner's Tale: In this tale, Chaucer comes to the defense of Christianity. Romance in the tales was permitted by the authorities in the Middle Ages. The romance mostly had comical elements. In the Summoner's Tale Chaucer festively inverts tradition so as not to present a perversion of Christianity. Authorities in the Middle Ages approved the romance form for tales, and the fabliau was a comic, carnivalesque inversion of the romance. "In Chaucer's use of these forms, laughter is produced by placing the past in the present. The Summoner develops a conflict between a friar and a layman.

The Summoner fits the profile of a carnival tale-teller as a parody of his profession who is damned according to tradition. Numerous other associations and details connect the Summoner with carnival tradition. Throughout the Summoner's Tale and the following tales, the attitude of carnival allows the Summoner and other pilgrims such as the Squire to parody Christian traditions. "(Bibliography.... ) How Chaucer constructs

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Summoner's portrait? It reveals his medical conditions. His method of cure and the diagnosis show that he is unnaturally hot. It indicates that he is choleric.

The disease is also related with sexuality. His astrological details are linked to Mars. He is expected to face difficult periods ahead. His disease is incurable; medicines will not have any effect. " The Summoner's attack on the Friar provides a context in which the Friar may tell his tale. In telling the tale, the Friar establishes his social superiority to summoners. The desire to proclaim learning and social superiority leads the Friar to make the summoner in his tale psychologically inconsistent; the summoner has little reaction to the announcement that his companion is a demon.

After the digression on summoners, the Friar draws on the exemplum tradition to camouflage his attack on the Summoner. " (Bibliography.... ) The Wife of Bath's Tale: The story has a more serious moral tone as compared to her prologue. It is dominated by her attitudes, personality and beliefs. The theme, the sovereignty of women, is common, but it has been dealt with in an uncommon style. The wife asserts how she has spent a major part of her life to match the interests of husband. She upholds and stands for this universal truth. Every woman should follow her ideals—she pleads. He (her husband) has no complaints against her.

This he says before a supreme court of women, headed by the queen. The important characteristics evident in this tale are, she wishes to dominate her husband. She has devised her own peculiar tactics to achieve the goal. Among the tools employed, one of them seems strange. She makes her husband suffer, and uses the persuasive techniques of argument. She quotes <https://assignbuster.com/characterization-in-chaucers-canterbury-tales/>



the sources and mentions the names of authorities in support of her assertions. Due to these arguments which put a lot of strain in the day to disposition, husband is frustrated and mentally exhausted; he caves in and agrees to her dictates to get some peace.

The Wife of Bath's tale tells us about women who are cunning and deceitful. They are difficult to win. The masterly Wife of Bath brags about her five husbands. When wife is the boss, it is the happiest marriage, according to such women. Women should control their husbands—it is astonishing that this statement is from women of the 14th century. Conclusion: Good literature crosses all barriers. It is ageless and timeless. Feelings and emotions are common for human beings all over the world. The influence of culture upon literature is seen in Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

Something about the background of Chaucer, He was an auditor, and justice of the peace and knight of the shire. He had good interaction with the ruling class. He had sharp insight into the class structure system. He had good estimate of the lower classes and also about the wealthy knight (ruling classes) But the novel has many ambiguities. This is because it has peculiar characters. Literature presents culture at a given time and it is part of cultural history. From this point of view Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is a very important contribution to the history of the 14th Century of England in particular and Europe in general.