

Chaucer's optimal hero

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In The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer uses the character traits of the clergy to exemplify the ideal character. Chaucer's members of the clergy display ideal characteristics such as generosity, righteousness, and servitude. Through exploration of the lifestyles of the clergy, Chaucer distinguishes the truly ideal, pious servants from secular and self-centered men.

Chaucer introduces several members of the clergy in The Prologue but the Parson stands out as a clergyman who is true to his duty, possessing a generous heart. Unlike numerous other corrupt members of the clergy, the Parson exudes a genuine attitude of love and care towards his fellow neighbours by "giving to poor parishioners round about/ Both from church offerings and his property" (line 486-487). Shown through his munificent deeds, the Parson exemplifies a great generosity that Chaucer admires and respects. By giving from his own possessions, the Parson illustrates a clear example of a remarkable man who is not bound by worldly matters. Jesus Christ teaches that "if thou wilt be perfect...give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19: 21). The Parson is not only a man who refuses to conform to the secular ways of being materialistic but also willingly gives to the poor and needy. Following Christ's teaching of sharing one's own possessions with others, the Parson is depicted as an exceedingly godly man with a generous spirit. Chaucer sharply contrasts this marvellous spirit of generosity in the abhorrent actions of the Friar. The very notion that "one should give silver for a poor Friar's care" instead of weeping and praying is ludicrous and ironic (line 230). Opposite to the Parson who gives away his possessions, the Friar takes money from the penitent public. His

disgusting deeds are despicable and demonstrate the materialistic nature of man, making him unworthy of being a friar. Loving his own life and only communing with the rich in hopes of gaining benefits, the Friar rebels against Christ's teachings: " He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal" (John 12: 25). The Friar fails to relinquish his materialistic views and yearns only to enjoy the pleasures of life on earth, neglecting the fact that he should concentrate on life in heaven. An execrable man such as the Friar shall surely forfeit everlasting life and suffer eternal damnation in hell. Chaucer clearly indicates that the Friar's actions are contrary to the ideal man when compared to the generous, giving attitude of the Parson.

In addition to his generous spirit, the Parson emanates a righteous lifestyle that reflects the teachings of the Gospels. He extends hospitable care towards brothers and sisters who are in need of his help; he neglects them " not in rain or thunder, / In sickness or in grief" (line 490-491). The Parson is not merely kind in his thoughts and beliefs but also in the way that he actually cares for others in need; his actions live up to the exemplary lifestyle of a parson. The Parson's assiduous attention to brothers and sisters in spite of any hindrances highlight his righteous way of living. True to his vows and duties, the Parson lives a life worthy of recognition and respect. In contrast, the Monk "[tends] to ignore" his vows and takes " the modern world's more spacious way" (line 172, 174). Chaucer reveals the Monk's secular way of living and displays the Monk's despicable lifestyle by describing him as a man who ignores the rules of the monastery and dwells on worldly pleasures. Furthermore, the Monk is a fat hunter who wears " fine

grey fur, the finest in the land" (line 192). His appearance reveals that he has not kept to his vows of poverty and the monastery rules to stay within the monastery. The Monk's fashionable lifestyle expresses his habit of hunting, which is a form of killing that a monk should not partake in. From his obesity, the Monk percolates a repulsive image for being a hypocrite who lives a life utterly different from a sacred monk who dutifully follows his vows of poverty. The Monk is a character whose shameful lifestyle evidently illustrates the despised and eschewed characteristics of the medieval period. Palpably disparate from the repugnant Monk, the Parson demonstrates his teachings in his own life because "if gold [rusts], what then will iron do" (line 498)? The Parson firmly believes that he must show other sinners how to live righteously through his own example; he is unwilling to submit to the hypocritical life that the Monk pursues. Although the Parson could make a living through hypocrisy as the Monk does, the Parson's willingness to engage himself in poverty and fully devote his life to his teachings exemplifies his righteous character.

Amidst all his noteworthy characteristics, the Parson ultimately defines the ideal character through his humble devotion to servitude. He possesses a kind passion for taking care of the needy:

"He [is] a shepherd and no mercenary, / Holy and virtuous he [is], but then/
Never contemptuous to sinful men, / Never disdainful, never too proud or
fine, / But [is] discreet in teaching and benign". (line 510-514)

Through the allusion to the parable of the good shepherd and the hireling, Chaucer insinuates that the Parson is a loyal leader to the needy people that

he serves, willing to protect and guard them even when rough obstacles may prevent him from doing so. Unlike the Friar or Monk who are like the irresponsible hired hand, the Parson's characteristic of devout servitude is portrayed as a shepherd who zealously serves his sheep, showing no objections to the arduous responsibility. He is an epitome of holiness, a willing servant with a heart that is forgiving and accepting to sinners. The attitude of forgiveness is predominately important in Chaucer's time as the Scriptures teaches man to "forgive men their trespasses" (Matthew 6: 14). Although the Parson lives a guiltless life worthy of praise, he does not boast of his morality and criticize sinners; instead, he remains humble and continues to spread the Gospel's teachings with patience and love. The Parson's sincere and humble style of servitude glistens gloriously when compared to the Pardoner's pretentious way of serving the church. Although the Pardoner serves through singing at the church, his main purpose of serving is to "win silver from the crowd" (line 719). Chaucer pokes fun at the Pardoner's disdainful act, implying that such pretentious servitude has no everlasting rewards in heaven but only temporary and earthly rewards of money. The Pardoner's iniquitous ways are contrary to the Christian belief of relinquishing earthly wealth and exhibits a disreputable and deplorable lifestyle. Utilizing sharp character contrast, Chaucer establishes the ideal standards of servitude through the Parson's true and humble heart.

Through careful characterization, Chaucer firmly evinces the ideal character worthy of respect and honor. He manifests generosity and righteousness in the life of the Parson, especially emphasizing his humble manner of servitude. In fact, Chaucer's interpretation of the Parson functions as a

respectable reminder to the clergy to remain humble and genuine in their faith. As Chaucer lived in a time when the Church was a predominant force and influence, his ideals reflected the teachings of the church; therefore, the Parson exemplifies the purity and devout nature of a man who genuinely serves God. He is surely an ideal character by which Chaucer uses to judge others.

In his portrayal of the ideal character, Chaucer celebrates the goodness of those who have a spirit of giving, a life of righteousness, and a heart of humility. These quintessential traits underlie the fundamental foundation to consolidating a moral and virtuous soul. The ideal character depicted by Chaucer is not merely a fictitious character of yore but a man that exemplifies integrity even in the modern world. Although tales may dissipate through the passing of time, moral standards will persevere pertinaciously through the ages.