

Reflecting the storyteller (canterbury tales)

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Sam Nelson Fr. Fitzgibbons English 190 10/28/04 Reflecting the Storyteller It is said that people often look like their pets. Geoffrey Chaucer plays off this idea with his literary work, *The Canterbury Tales*, by making the character's story reflect upon the character him or herself. The description of a character is a sort of foreshadowing of what kind of tale he or she will tell. The stories are written so that the content and the style both relate to the storyteller's character. The Miller, a rough and rude man, demonstrates Chaucer's technique when he tells a tale of crude subject. "The Pardoner's Tale" demonstrates this as well. He is a sly and cunning man, one who is good at deceiving for gain. His tale preaches against the very sin that he commits, as to attain his own goal. Each storyteller projects a part of his or her character into the story that he or she tells. Chaucer's description of the Miller is one that would most likely drive most women away, for he is described as a very strong and masculine man with immoral traits and a rude, obnoxious demeanor. Chaucer writes that the Miller is "As tough a yokel as you care to meet / The Miller was. His big-beefed arms and thighs / Took many a ram put up as wrestling prize" (*The Miller's Tale*, lines 532-534). Chaucer comments on the Miller's moral character, or rather his immoral character, several times, such as when he mentions that "He was a thick, squat-shouldered lump of sins" (*The Miller's Tale*, line 535). Again, the Miller's character is described as being immoral when Chaucer says, "He could steal corn and charge for it three times" (*The Miller's Tale*, line 546). Chaucer goes on and makes the Miller to come across as a rude and loud. "His mouth would open out / Like a great furnace, and he would sing and shout / His ballads and jokes of harlotries and crimes" (*The Miller's Tale*, 543-545). "The Miller's

Tale" is one of taboo topics: adultery, and defamation of character. "'The Miller's Tale' is a gross parody of the Knight's moralistic story, bringing the tale down to lower orders and stripping it of the honor and chivalry that marked the Knight's story" (Ross 3). Even before the Miller begins his story, the others are asking him to not tell it, due to its crude content. " For I'll tell a golden legend and a life Both of a carpenter and his wife, How a student put horns on the fellow's head." " Shut up and stop your racket," the Reeve said. " Forget your ignorant drunken bawdiness. It is a sin and a great foolishness To injure any man by defamation And to give women such a reputation." (The Miller's Tale, lines 31-38) Even the narrator gives fair warning of " The Miller's Tale", by saying he wishes that he did not have to write it down, but does because he feels he must. The tale itself reflects upon the Miller's crude character when it uses humor. " The Miller's Tale" is littered with crude humor, violence, and lust. To reflect the Miller's own crude nature, he threw off-color humor into his story, such as, " Should he give his ass a smack; and hastily / He opened the window, and thrust out quietly, / Buttocks and haunches, all the way, his bum" (The Miller's Tale, lines 579-581). Even the choices of words the Miller uses shows his obscene and crude mannerisms. " The Miller's language reflects his offensive and immoral behaviors" (Benson 16), such as " ass" and " piss." The usage of these words is still considered rude and explicative by today's standards. Due to the more rigid social standards of the old world, the Miller would only be perceived as even more crude of a character. In an analysis of " The Miller's Tale", Jeremy Ross mentions that, " The Miller's tale thus prizes the characters who are the most shrewd rather than those who hold more sentimental emotions or obey

traditional standards of behavior" (Ross 2). Chaucer's portrayal of the Pardoner also shows how character reflects the story. Chaucer describes the pardoner's physicality by pointing out his deformities, especially when Chaucer writes, " I think he was a gelding or a mare (The Pardoner's Tale, line 673)." Chaucer also describes the Pardoner as a deceiver and writes about his methods of deception. The Pardoner carries with him several items that he passes off as holy relics. The Pardoner essentially comes right out and says he is a scam artist: They may not make an offering in that case To these my relics; they have no power nor grace. By such hornswogling I've won, year by year, A hundred marks since being a pardoner. I stand in my pulpit like a true divine, And when the people sit I preach my line To ignorant souls, as you have heard before And tell skullduggeries by the hundred more. (The Pardoner's Tale, lines 56-57, 61-66) The Pardoner takes pride in his ability to deceive and profit from it. He says exactly what he needs to so he can get a specific response from his listeners. He puts on a charade, and plays it well, with no intention to actually pardon people from sin. In an analysis of " The Pardoner's Tale", Jeremy Ross says that, " He states explicitly that his goal is not to save people from sin, but to gain money from them. The Pardoner says that he will not imitate the apostles in their poverty, but will have food, comfort, and a wench in every town" (Ross 2). In " The Pardoner's Tale", he preaches about how money is the root of all evil. He tells this tale to aid his goals of false pardoning. Ross says, "'The Pardoner's Tale' is a direct extension of the personality of the narrator, an overtly moralistic tale that serves primarily to elicit a specific response" (Ross 2). This response is one that will allow the Pardoner to profit off of his

deceived " flock." " The Pardoner's Tale" is just another of his deceptive stories for the " ignorant souls." He preaches against what it is he is actually doing. Ross sums up the Pardoner's character nicely when he writes, " The Pardoner is not a moral man, but he nevertheless has a moral system to which he most certainly does not adhere" (Ross 1). Chaucer's method of foreshadowing the story-type by relating a person's character to their story is a way to allow a reader to make a more personal connection to the story. With a background of its storyteller, a person can read into the text a lot more clearly, finding certain flairs of personality with each story. Works Cited Chaucer, Geoffry. The Canterbury Tales (1380). Rpt. In The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces. Ed. Maynard Mack. New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1997. 1165-1217. Benson, Larry D. The Riverside Chaucer. 3rd ed. Boston: 1987. 3-22 Ross, Jeremy. " The Pardoner's Tale." ClassicNotes. (2000). 24 Oct. 2004. . Ross, Jeremy. " The Miller's Tale." ClassicNotes. (2000). 24 Oct. 2004. .