

Research paper on

Sociology



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Hierarchy and social status are two of the major aspects of the Middle Ages, and two of the major themes embodied in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In fact, what makes *The Canterbury Tales* is such an outstanding literary work is that Chaucer as depicted an extensive range of characters and occupations from the 14th century. *The Canterbury Tales*, of course, contains characters of both genders, from the various prominent social classes of the time, from the common to the aristocrat, the poor to the wealthy, the secular to the saintly, etc., and focuses on their interactions and relationships. The lowest, laborer class is one of the prominent classes that Chaucer touches on in *The Canterbury Tales*. The purpose of this essay is to analyze Chaucer's "General Prologue" and "The Miller's Tale" in order to decide whether Chaucer is ridiculing the lowest class or criticizing the social elite of the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages during the 14th century was a time when significant social changes were occurring (Schlauch 204). For Chaucer, the feudalism during Middle Ages was the reason behind the division between affluent aristocrats and the poor laborers. Thus, through the Miller and the tale he tells, Chaucer criticizes the medieval social hierarchy. There strain, which was present between the social classes in the Middle Ages, becomes apparent in *The Canterbury Tales* in "the Miller's Prologue" when the 'drunk' Miller interrupts The Monk, who according to the social ranks of the pilgrims, was supposed to tell the next tale after The Knight. The Miller, who clearly belongs to the lowest social class, disrupts the social order even before he begins telling his tale. Of course, "The Miller's Tale" itself is an embodiment of the lowest social class during the Middle Ages, and their retaliation against the wealthy, social elite.

Both the Miller himself, and John, the carpenter in his tale, belong to the lowest class in the medieval society. Chaucer purposely stereotypes the Miller's Tale to his character, his personality, and social status. For instance, in the "General Prologue", the Miller is characterized quite negatively as a bawdy, loathsome man, who is dishonest, who steals, and is obscene (Chaucer 560-63). Similarly, the carpenter in The Miller's Tale is also portrayed negatively, as an illiterate and meek fool. Miller accurately describes the Miller, and portrays the carpenter in his tale, complying with the medieval stereotypes of the lowest social class, especially after the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt. However, by narrating the Miller's Tale through the boisterous, exigent, and violent character of the Miller, Chaucer manages to focus on the class-consciousness and struggles of the lowest social class, thus criticizing the medieval social hierarchy.

Members of the social elite during the Middle Ages stereotyped members of the lower class as lowly, loathsome beings, perhaps this is why Chaucer emphasizes on how physically grotesque and unattractive the Miller is. Chaucer also describes the Miller as a "broad" and "thick" man who is extremely strong (Chaucer (548-551), which is an allusion to the strength of the lower, labor class, which was growing during the 14th century. Unlike the Miller, John in his tale is an old man who does all his work on his own. Chaucer specifically emphasizes on the physical labor that the carpenter willingly performs. While the Miller is a representation of the growing strength of the lower class, the carpenter in his tale makes the readers feel sympathy for him, a sympathy that the lower class deserved during the Middle Ages.

Chaucer even goes to the extent of vilifying the social elite in order to make
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readers feel sympathetic for the John and other members of the lowest class. John, who surprisingly has never heard of the Biblical story of Noah, (Chaucer and Benson 376), becomes a victim Nicholas's conspiracy and deception, who twists Noah's story of the Flood to fool John. Here Chaucer is pointing out the corruption and the exploitive nature of the social elite during the Middle Ages. Again, the portrayal of social justice in "The Miller's Tale" makes the readers sympathize with John and lowest class. After being deceived throughout the tale, the story ends with John physically injured and ridiculed by those around him. This reflects the unfortunate fact that finding justice against the social elite in the Middle Ages was almost impossible for the lowest class.

The highest and the lowest social classes during the Middle Ages had very diverse power dynamics that Chaucer successfully reveals through the Miller, his disruption of the social order, along with sympathetic portrayal of the lowest class in "The Miller's Tale." It may seem that Chaucer is ridiculing the lowest class by emphasizing on the Miller's bawdy, loathsome appearance; however, the above analysis proves the fact that both the Miller and his tale were used by Chaucer as a means of criticizing the social elite and their exploitation of the lowest social class during the Middle Ages. Of course, in doing so, Chaucer is forced to stereotype "The Miller's Tale" to the Miller himself, and the similarities between the Miller, from the "General Prologue," and his tale can be found in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

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