

# Comic realism of Chaucer in "the prologue to the canterbury tales"



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Ans: Realism in literature implies portraiture of life, people and things as they really are without idealizing them. True to this idea, Chaucer is basically a realist and is interested in people and things around him and the atmosphere and activities of England in the fourteenth century. His realism is based on direct observation blended with his practical outlook on life and he thus collected information about persons local, national and international. Life was not bitter to him and none was unacceptable in its painting because everybody is an integral part of it.

People with failings or shortcomings provide the background against which the virtuous are measured. Like Shakespeare, Chaucer in the Prologue has painted life as he has seen it and has left it to others to draw the moral. He does not project his likes and dislikes and completely effaces himself from his account of the pilgrims and their stories. He thereby achieves the objectivity that is the most important thing in both novel and drama, and the Prologue contains seeds of both these literary genres. His aim was to give “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

This devotion to realism led G. K. Chesterton to comment that the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales is the “first novel in history” and human characters here are not taken up in isolation but in companionship and in the process of interaction. A realist by temperament, Chaucer is never satisfied by mere transcriptions of life. He modifies, suppresses, emphasizes, exaggerates and invents to make the picture of life full of artistic beauty. Chaucer creates human figures which are all individualized and move by themselves.

As a poet and artist, he is primarily interested in varieties and picturesque types suitable for stories. He took the advantage of customary pilgrimage to give a vivid picture of the society of the time. He understood that the pilgrimage was not actuated by religious motive. To many, it provided the opportunity for the merry-making, pleasure-seeking, indulging in music and vulgarity. Chaucer as the narrator does not try to censor the indecent stories of the pilgrims or the vulgar elements in them because representing the story-tellers along with their stories forms the primary requisite of a realist.

So the pilgrims with all their oddities are all human beings and they provide the pleasure of viewing a multi-coloured pageantry and the entire Prologue is so designed as to present the pilgrims in their holiday and relaxed mood in which they are self-revealing, and their daily lives, their normal habits of thinking, their prejudices, professional bias, most familiar ideas and personal idiosyncrasies establish them as people of the real life of England of the fourteenth century.

It was a time when the common man was gaining prominence and affluence, when extravagance in food and dress was becoming increasingly prominent. It was a time when the craftsmen replaced the feudal lords as controller of the money-supply system and began to flourish with the manufacturer and when the guilds acquired political power. Chaucer paints his time when the middle classes were gaining prominence in the social order and the power of the merchants was felt by the aristocrats. This is a faithful picture of the poet's time.

But in the process of painting a cross-section of the society, the poet could not but notice and record funny things in them. The fountain of laughter and mirth in the Prologue arises out of the discrepancy between the ideal and the real, between what should be and what really is and the poet is infinitely amused and lovingly points out the departures which make others laugh. The comic is here translucent as Chaucer acknowledges that people are both good and bad, and evils, particularly in the area of religion, arise out of human weaknesses.

Among his paintings of pilgrims, the religious area gets the greatest prominence and, except in the case of the good Parson, Chaucer has pointed out the departures of each person from what is expected of him and what is the standard. While there is mirth or laughter, realization dawns that religious zeal was waning and scepticism was slowly coming to surface. Through realism the poet imbues unity to his tale of some thirty odd pilgrims coming from various quarters of life like God's world, his own world, the world of the Port of London, the worlds of England itself and the poet infused realism into his work to make it a portrait gallery.

Chaucer has chosen individual characters to stress on the comic element. Though he does not spare any one, he seems to target the ecclesiastical area to show how it was invaded in his time by other motives. Harmless oddities against normalcy evoke laughter and this is found in almost all the major characters in the Prologue and Chaucer records them with a great gusto.

It is wrong to seek any kind of irony, sarcasm and satire in such instances.

The Prioress is a fine lady and deeply religious and ordinarily there is nothing laughable in her. But against her religious vocation stands out her meticulous care to observe the elegant table-manners regarding food. This fuss along with her effort to imitate court-manners and special attention to her gem-studded rosary evoke laughter. The Benedictine monk is extremely fond of hunting and wins all the prizes in fights.

The Pardoner feels pain to stretch his neck like a dove from side to side to look at people to cheat them. The Friar is fat as a whale and walks as a swan. The Knight who has been in a number of battles and obviously has killed many is devoid of any ruthlessness in ordinary life. Rather he is as gentle as a maid. His son, the Squire, is an apprentice-knight but in love and has careful attention to his dress and fashion. He is so much in love that he remains awake all night like a nightingale.

His hair was so arranged that it looked to have been pressed. The Yeoman is expert in woodcraft. The Merchant conducts himself so elegantly that none can guess that he is in debt. The Sergeant-at-Law is no doubt busy but always maintains the look of being busier than what he actually is. The cook uses various ingredients for his cooking. But against the standard norm of cleanliness he has an ulcer on his shin and prepares some sort of paste using various other ingredients.

The Shipman is a very able man in his profession but has a weakness for wine which he regularly steals from the merchant whose goods he is carrying and who himself is travelling on board. The Doctor of Physic is successful as

a doctor but he is an expert in astrology and depends on it to determine the proper time to give the right medicine. The Wife of Bath wants precedence over everybody and everything in the church regarding offerings and prayers. On a Sunday she carries a head-gear which is sure to weigh ten pounds.