

A purposeless pilgrimage: the canterbury tales



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The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories told by the characters within the story, written by Geoffrey Chaucer. He wrote with a strong opinion which he uses to make a blatant statement about the Roman Catholic Church. His opinion is that people within the church, including the leaders can be living hypocritical lives. It reflects the idea that the characters in The Canterbury Tales were on a purposeless, spiritually meaningless pilgrimage. This piece directly addressed the religious issues of the common Englishman. Chaucer was not the only one to shine light on the religious hypocrisy, but he allowed even those of lower standing to become knowledgeable with the publishing of The Canterbury Tales. The most interesting development of Chaucer's idea is that history agreed with his desire for change in the church. The Canterbury Tales altered the standing of the Roman Catholic Church by expressing to the common man that corruption existed within the commonly accepted church.

Chaucer created The Canterbury Tales, a story of a pilgrimage to Canterbury Cathedral in which each of the characters tell tales with morals. Chaucer began the prologue from the perspective of the main character. The nameless character was on his way to Canterbury Cathedral when he crossed paths with a large group headed in the same direction. He joined their group of twenty-nine, and he enlightened the reader to the appearances and personalities of his new acquaintances (Eds, 95. 19-27). Chaucer reached a new crowd with The Canterbury Tales in the way that common people could relate. Each character had a career, spouse and family; ambitions, motives, and a reputation. Although Chaucer never completed his initial plans for The Canterbury Tales, he wrote the prologue

and twenty-four tales (Eds 90). Prentice Hall Literature claims, regardless of the technically incomplete work, the tales, “ stand together as a complete work,” (90). This poem used the pilgrims and their stories to further the underlining message.

The Canterbury Tales is a literary work which showed the prominence of religion in Chaucer’s time. At this time in England, Catholicism was the most predominant form of Christianity. Church leaders held great strength; their influence was remarkable. Singman and McClean venture so far as to say, “ Being a part of medieval England was in fact the same as being part of the church. All Christians in Western Europe were subject to the spiritual authority of the Pope (the Catholic Church was the only officially accepted church in Western Europe, although there were other churches elsewhere,)” (26). Another large religious influence was the encouragement of monasticism. Küng wrote, “ In the officious church ideal view, the medieval world was a world dominated by priests, nuns, monks, and their ideal of continence,” (105). Church, spirituality, and religion were fairly large aspects of the England before The Canterbury Tales.

The Canterbury Tales altered the standing of the Roman Catholic Church. Hidden truths can be found through the characters and the tales of the pilgrims. Despite the fact that The Canterbury Tales is fiction, these people represented Englishmen of this time. Chaucer explained to the readers who they are and where they have come from. Many times he described with honorable qualities, yet the unfortunate, shameful qualities outweighed the positive. Anthony of Taize said, “ Chaucer, no doubt, more or less realized that he was better equipped to represent fallen nature than effective grace.

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That would help explain why critics use the word 'idealized' to qualify Parson and Ploughman portraits. Still, he certainly knew a thing or two about the possible alternatives to the primrose path." The church could no longer be viewed the same due to the truths of the pilgrims.

To note the troubled motives of the pilgrimage, Chaucer used examples of people who were expected to understand the significance of the pilgrimage. The Nun or Prioress was the first notable character. She earned the position of aristocracy and was a very refined and cultured woman. This nun, Madam Eglantyne was said to be greatly sentimental and kind, as well as wearing a bracelet with prayer beads and singing a daily prayer (122-166).

Interestingly, she made her religious act of prayer very public; often times that is not necessary. In Matthew 6: 5 it says, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full," (The Treasure Study Bible 1324). Verse six and seven continue on to say prayer should often be private and personal.

Although praying in public is not wrong, the motives of the Nun are questionable. Her prayers seem to have been simply out of duty. Swisher claims, "[The] Prioress is more worldly than religious," (39). She gave the appearance of being spiritual, yet she does seem to be more concerned with etiquette.

Her focus may have been on proper living and etiquette, but the Nun certainly would not

be considered corrupt in comparison to her fellow spiritual aristocrats, the Monk and the Friar. Regarding the Monk, Chaucer wrote, " The Rule of St. Benet or St. Maur/ As old and strict he tended to ignore; /He let go by the things of yesterday/ And took the modern's world's more spacious way," (177-180). This monk certainly did not have the desire to oppose the ways of the world. He enjoyed food, and hunting and " he spared no expense, (196)". The Monk presented the disappointing reality of the devout religious figures.

In The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer allowed the reader to know the Friar is a man who should not be trusted. The Friar, named Hubert, was an openly religious man (279). He was a member of all four of the monastic orders, yet he lived simply the way he wanted. Chaucer wrote, " For he was qualified to hear confessions, / Or so he said, with more than priestly scope; / He had a special license from the Pope," (223-224). Chaucer then suggested, " Therefore instead of weeping or prayer / One should give silver for a poor Friar's care," (235-236). In lines 245-250, Chaucer described his relationship with barmaids and the nearby taverns. He wrote, " For in so eminent as a man as he/ It was not fitting with the dignity/ Of his position." He embraced worldly living. Worldly living entirely contradicts the concept of being a friar. He rebuked those with a speck in their eye, ignoring the plank in his own (Matthew 7: 3, The Treasure Study Bible 1326) . The stanzas continue recording all of the worldly activities in which he was involved. He abused his power, took advantage of the vulnerable, and participated in an immoral lifestyle.

On the other hand for the first time in the entire prologue, the reader feels appreciation for one of the pilgrims. He was a " holy-minded man," (487)

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who Chaucer declared “ truly knew Christ’s gospel and would preach it,” (491). The Parson was diligent, humble, and led by following God’s Word himself. Chaucer never claimed such respectable things of the other twenty-eight pilgrims. This ideal pilgrim represented the hope for the Roman Catholic Church when everything else was falling apart. The genuine life of the Parson pointed out that not all of the church was in the wrong. The Parson represented the remaining purity. His lifestyle choices were almost directly opposite of the many other pilgrims. One notable difference was his extreme selflessness. Chaucer wrote, “ He much disliked extorting tithe or fee,” unlike the Pardoner. He helped fellow Christians in need; he was just a call away (495-504). Chaucer was very clear about his standing with the Parson. “ I think there never was a better priest. / He sought no pomp or glory in his dealing, / No scrupulosity had spiced his feelings./ Christ and His Twelve Apostles and their lore/ He taught, but followed it himself before, ” (534-536). True Christianity was certainly not prevalent in the message in The Canterbury Tales. Excluding the Parson, the majority of its characters contradicted the belief of purity and godliness.

Chaucer saved the most extreme character descriptions for last; the Pardoner was one of the strongest examples of a corrupt religious character in The Canterbury Tales. The Pardoner sold relics of no value and of no significance to the gullible Christians by his convicting songs and sermons. John Wellford says, “ He is therefore a 14th century English version of the snake-oil salesman.” He took advantage of the ignorant and deceived congregations into handing in hard-earned money for fake souvenirs. The most horrifying idea the Pardoner presented is the irony in his sermons and

his lifestyle. He lived his life knowing right and doing wrong. The Pardoner was a man who led his life radically in contradiction to his supposed beliefs.

The Pardoner's moral in his tale was "Radix malorum est cupiditas." The moral means "Greed is the root of all evil," in Latin (Chaucer line 8, 142). His purpose in telling the tale was to reap the benefits of those simply wanting forgiveness and a relationship with God. The Pardoner wanted tangible benefits. He stated, "But let me briefly make my purpose plain; I preach for nothing but for greed of gain," (41-42). Salvation of his listeners was completely insignificant to him (23). With the Pardoner, Chaucer provided a solid example of what the pilgrims should not be.

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales changed the way people viewed the Catholic Church. He chose to write a fictional story, yet his intentions are still clear. One cannot misconstrue a segment from The Canterbury Tales' prologue. Chaucer wrote, "For if a priest be foul in whom we trust / No wonder that a common man should rust; / And shame it is to see-let priests take stock-/ A soiled shepherd and a snowy flock. / The true example that a priest should give / Is one of cleanness, how the sheep should live," (511-515). Chaucer needed the common man to see the hypocrisy and double standards of the Roman Catholic Church in the thirteenth century. Conveniently, as history shows, reform was soon on its way (Collinson). Elton declared, "The Church was full of weaknesses and abuses; reforms had been talked about for a very long time," (105). The Canterbury Tales assisted in preparation for what is known as The Reformation of the fourteenth century. The Roman Catholic Church was put on the spot, revealing the need for reform.

The Canterbury Tales emphasized the realities of the Roman Catholic Church in Chaucer's age. Chaucer's piece of literature created quite the disruption in the typical view of accepting the church. He used the pilgrims traveling to Canterbury Cathedral to speak on the spiritual status of the nation and church. There was a very clear message of hypocrisy in the majority of the pilgrims who claim Christianity in the story. Looking from a Biblical perspective, their doctrine does not agree with their actions. The Canterbury Tales strengthened the desire for purity within the church.