Analysis Of The Canterbury Tales By Geoffrey Chaucer

In the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, he tells a tale about 29 diverse characters that are part of a pilgrimage to Canterbury. Each character's personality, behavior, and appearance reflect the different types of people within the different social classes during the middle age.

To understand the different social classes or estates that are within the Canterbury Tales, one must understand the historical background of the Middle Age. During the Middle Age, Europe was controlled by feudalism. Feudalism is a "socio-political and economic structure used during the Middle Ages." (Pariona) Feudalism was a way to organize the different social classes to work together economically. As Yildiz states "it defined the position of each person and his connections with people of higher and lower rank." It was also believed that this was the "divine order and God created these estates to maintain the prosperity of society." (Yildiz)

Within the feudal system, the king oversaw the different social classes. Pariona explains the social order of the economy. First, the king would give land to the nobility in exchange for military service. The nobles would overlook and protect the common people in exchange for labor and to share their crops. Each class would benefit the other. If one class was removed or didn't do their assigned jobs, the government structure would go downhill. How the king would control the different classes to depend on each other reflects the political aspect of feudalism. (Yildiz)

The three estates within the Canterbury Tales reflects on the feudal system. The three estates are the clergy, nobility, and peasants. The clergy is the first estate, they were who prayed and worked within the church. Yildiz explains that the clergy was the highest estate because it was "clerical formation". Which showed that the religion had great power within the middle age because they alongside with royalty. It followed the idea of the "divine order". There were two types of clergy, secular and regular. Secular clergy lived "in the world". They were not controlled by religious order and help serve the community. While the regular clergy must follow religious order and devote themselves to the religion.

In the Canterbury Tales, the characters "The Parson" and "The Monk" both demonstrate the two different clergies. The Parson would be part of the secular clergy. In the tale, he is known to be devoted in his religion:

That Christe gospel trewely wolde preche;

Hs parisshens devoutly would he teche.

Benigne he was, and wonder diligent,

And in adversitee ful pacient,

And swich he was preved ofte sithes. (Damrosch 340).

Besides showing his devotion, he would also help his community which follows the idea of living

“in the world”. In lines 493-497, it explains how giving and genuine the Parson. That he will help the sick no matter the conditions. The Parson follows the characteristics of being a secular clergy making him the ideal clergy man.

On the other hand, The Monk is known to be part of the regular clergy. Within the tale, he hunts animals instead of reading the bible. He doesn’t care nor follows the “requirement’ and duties of monastic life; he is “recheless”. (Bowden 109) As a Monk, he must follow the monastic rules St Maurus and St Benedict. In the tale, the Monk believes that the rules are out of date therefore he doesn’t follow it:

The rule of Saint Maure or od Saint Beneit

by cause that it was old and somdel strait—

this ilke Monk leet olde things pace,

and heels after the new world the space. (Damrosch 326)

Although he has the title of being part of the church, he isn’t as devoted to the religion as the Parson.

The second estate is the nobility. They are known to fight and protect the common people and peasants. As Yildiz explains, some people that would be under this estate would be vassals, dukes, earls, barons, and knights. The king would assign these nobles to be part of the military as well. Given-Wilson (29) explains how noblemen are chosen “by their wealth, status, and political influence.” In the tale, the Knight is known for being a “worthy man” due to the different wars he has fought in. Such as, Lithuania, Russia, and Alexandria. His reputation of how many wars he’s been a part of follows the status aspect of nobility. The Knight also shows his full loyalty to his king, “ful worthy was he in his lords were”. (Longman 320) The Knight’s devotion and loyalty to his king and country follows the characteristics of the ideal noblemen.

The last estate were the commoners and the peasants. They spent most of their time farming and selling goods such as clothes to the other estates. Yildiz explains that within the commoners, there were subcategories in terms of wealth and status. A person within this estate can either live happily by owning a lot of land and animals or live and work under the control under their master. An example of this subcategory would be the Franklin from the Canterbury Tales. In the tale, the Franklin is a landowner. The Franklin “ful ofte time he was Knight of the Shire” (Damrosch 334). The Franklin is wealthy enough to own land and had a lot of food, but he would have the food ready for his neighbors. It shows that he doesn’t let his social status affect his morality. The Franklin would be considered a positive representation of this subcategory of the commoners.

The three main estates: the clergy, nobility, and peasants were focused towards the men during the Middle Age. It differentiated men with their working state and profession. Women were classified differently; they were determined by their sexual activity or marital status. (Schwartz). The three feminine estates are “wife, widow, and virgin”. Within the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer raises the feminine estates by providing two different characters, The Wife of Bath and the Prioress. Their different backgrounds and experiences are what differentiates them to be represent the feminine estates. They also represent the ideal female from the church’s point of

view.

Like the male estates, the church had the higher power compared to other social classes. In this case, the virgin estate would be considered as the top estate. The virgin estate consisted of non-married women or women that were devoted to God and the church. Therefore, the Prioress would be considered as part of the “virgin” estate. During the medieval times, the church believed that virginity was very important. As Heckel states “religious authorities saw virginity as a way to salvation, a treasure to be locked away and promised only to the Divine Bridegroom, Christ.” If a woman kept their virginity, they’re less likely to commit any sinful acts.

Within the Canterbury Tales, the character that would fit this idea is the Prioress. Besides her title, the Prioress’s personality traits show that she follows a devoted and innocent lifestyle. Chaucer emphasizes that she has great table manners and always kept herself in great-shape and clean. As well as, “she was so charitable and so pitous” (Damrosch 325), which shows that she has a great heart and cares for living things. The Prioress is seen as the ideal female of the church due to her personal traits and virginity.

On the other hand, the secular authorities believed that “virginity as something to be guarded and kept, but eventually dispended in a legal and faithful marriage”. (Heckel) The Wife Of Bath would be part of this idea because in the Canterbury tales, she explains how she has been married to five men and had sex with them. She also explains her fourth’s husband’s death which automatically makes her a widow. Therfore to her marital experiences, the Wife of Bath is part of the “wife” and “widow” estate.

Besides the Wife of Bath representing the different feminine estates, Chaucer emphasizes her character more because she represents men’s misogynistic view during the medieval age. During this time period, men saw women to be inferior. They were seen as weak and unfaithful. Men believed that they only married men to gain money and for a better status. Women were seen as a sexual object.

In the General Prologue, Chaucer emphasizes the Wife of Bath’s appearance “hir hosen weren of fin scarlet reed, ful straite yteyd, and shoes ful moiste and newe. Bold was hir face and reed of hewe” (Damrosch 340). Her physical description is very sexual therefore she symbolizes lust. Which is the opposite of what’s expected in woman from the church because she’s too revealing with her clothes and body. Another aspect that Chaucer emphasizes is her experience with sex and marriage.

The Wife of Bath is very vulgar and passionate towards the idea of marriage and virginity. She argues the idea why is it bad to marry and have sex with multiple men? She believes that why would God bless women a vagina ad not use. It doesnt make sense to her because for women who do want children they must use their parts to reproduce because how else will children be born. As she states:

For hadde God comanded maidenhede,

Thanne hadde he dampned wedding with the deede;

And certes, if there were no seed ysowe,

Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe? (Damrosch 377)

Although she does give an interesting point, she misuses multiple quotes from the bible. Overall, the Wife of Bath gives a negative representation of women and supports men's misogynist idea that women marry men to control and steal their wealth and status.

During the 14th century, the Peasants Revolt of 1381 occurred. In Hutchinson Encyclopedia, 20,000 men and women went to London and protested "against unfair treatment by their lords and the government" What led to this revolt was the reduction of wages to the peasants and a new poll tax for the army. Due to the state the government was in, many peasants began to refuse work under the feudal system. Which led to the creation of two new social classes; the intellectuals and the merchants.

The intellectuals were those who "trained in literature and writing, but who were not destined to a professional career within the Church." (Schwartz). The Clerk from the Canterbury Tales is titled as the "life of study" (Mann 74) due to his devotion to studying and his academics. Some examples of his devotion would be how he uses his money to buy books instead of clothes. As well as they way he speaks shows that he's influenced by the subject of philosophy, "souning in moral vertu was his speech, and gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche" (Damrosch 332).

The merchants were known to sell goods during the Peasant Revolt of 1381. As stated before, they did not want to be controlled, therefore they began to sell food and clothes as an act of freedom from the government. As Yiliz states, the merchants were emerging members from the "landless men, escaped serfs, casual harvest labourers, beggars, and outlaws." A common issue that would occur within the merchants was not gaining a lot of profit in sales.

The character "The Merchant" reflects this social class. The way Chaucer describes the Merchant gives the readers that he is the ideal businessman by his appearance and actions. In lines 272-274 of the General Prologue, the Merchant is wearing a nice hat and boots to show his elegance, as a businessman should. In line 277, the Merchant emphasizes the earnings he's made. He also mentions trade routes over sea is a great way to make profit in lines 277-278. All these qualities are what makes the ideal businessman and merchant because although the Merchant is not financially stable, he still gives the audience the impression that he's doing successfully great at his job.

In conclusion, each character of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales represents a social class within the Medieval Age. Each of the character's appearance and behavior reflect the ideology and stereotypes of the three male estates, feminine estates, and the two new social classes: the intellectuals and the merchants.

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