Canterbury Tales: Literary Analysis

In the Canterbury Tales, “Prologue” author Geoffrey Chaucer tells the tales of thirty pilgrims going on a pilgrimage as they engage in storytelling. During the pilgrimage we are introduced to one of the characters called the Summoner. The Summoner is someone the ecclesiastical court hires to bring before them to punish for their spiritual crimes. He has a hideous exterior and is very unpleasant to be around when he’s drunk. Through Chaucer’s characteristics the Summoner is described as an appalling, dishonest, vile, and a lustful man.

Through physical features and appearance, Chaucer describes the Summoner as repulsive to be around. He has “his face on fire, like a cherubim,” the “carbuncles” on his face, his “narrow,“ eyes and “black scabby brows,” all support Chaucer’s description of the Summoner being displeasing to look at especially to children as they “were afraid when he appeared” (Chaucer 642-643, 645-646). Such scars show how serious his presence was. Chaucer exhibits this character’s defects throughout the prologue to show the effects of his face. Another way Chaucer details the incurable faults are when he says, “ no quicksilver, lead ointment, tartar creams/ No brimstone, no boracic, so it seems/ Could make a salve that had the power to bite/ Clean up, or cure his whelks of knobby white/ Or purge the pimples sitting on his cheeks” (Chaucer 647- 651). This shows how appalling and unrecoverable his face truly was. These distinguishable features show the reaction his presence has on people. Chaucer also describes the Summoner’s eating habits when he says “garlic he loved, and onions too, and leeks” (Chaucer 652). This shows how unbearable he was to be around because of his odor. Chaucer includes this description to make the reader understand how disgusting he is. Both the Summoner’s physical features and appearance portray how repugnant he is.

Chaucer also uses actions to characterize the Summoner’s lustful behavior as unfit for his position in the ecclesiastical court. For “he was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow,” depicts the depths of the Summoner’s uncontrollable desires (Chaucer 644). The Summoner would also “keep a concubine,” showing his sexual tendencies (Chaucer 668). Chaucer assigns the Summoner’s conduct with the nature “type of sexual unrestraint” (Hoffman 12). The Summoner is supposed to be an example for the church and follow it’s teachings yet, through Chaucer’s description he has his “perverted spirits” (Hoffman 12). Another way Chaucer describes the Summoner as unsuitable for his status in the church is by him taking bribes from people to forgive their crimes in fear of excommunication. He would catch people commiting sins “and if he found some rascal with a maid/He would instruct him not to be afraid/ In such a case of the Archdeacon’s curse/ (Unless the rascal’s soul were in his purse). For in his purse the punishment should be” (671-675), shows how he disobeys the church’s teachings. This displays the Summoner’s abilities to be deceiving to benefit himself. Chaucer shows this to the reader that Summoner is not to be trusted and likes to profit of others fears. The Summoner’s actions demonstrate what a disgrace he is to the church.

Author Geoffrey Chaucer also uses speech to characterize the Summoner’s facade and corruption. The Summoner loved “drinking strong red wine till all was hazy. Then he would shout and jabber as if crazy, And wouldn’t speak a word except in Latin/When he was drunk, such tags as he was pat in;/He only had a few, say two or three/That he had mugged up out of some decree/No wonder, for he heard them every day”(Chaucer 653-659). This shows though

he would get drunk and say random things, he was aware he wasn't smart. Therefore he wanted others to assume that he was, hence him saying the only Latin words he knew. Chaucer presents this to tell the reader he says these words to pretend that he is educated. He also shows the Summoner's corruptness when he says "'Purse is the good Archdeacon's Hell,'" displays his tendency to get easily bribed (Chaucer 676). He rather collect money from criminals rather than punish them for their sins. Chaucer tarnishes his character by making him someone who gets easily persuaded to evade their sins. The Summoner's speech and dialogue express him being dishonorable.

Chaucer also shows the possibilities for the Summoner's reasoning for going on the pilgrimage. The Summoner seemed to go on the pilgrimage not for secular or sacred reasons but rather profane reasons. In the prologue he enjoys taking money from sinners by making them think paying money will relieve them from ex-communication. Which leads the reader to assume he went on a pilgrimage in order to profit off the sinners. The Summoner says "'Purse is the good Archdeacon's Hell', said he. But well I know he lied in what he said/A curse should put a guilty man in dread/For curses kill, as shriving brings, salvation. We should beware of ex-communication" (Chaucer 676-680). Chaucer directly states he knows the Summoner is using this to appeal to gullible sinners who will do anything to absolve their sins. The Summoner using sinners remorse to benefit him is poorly looked on by Chaucer. Based on how Chaucer describes him, he went on the pilgrimage for the sake of his own interests.

The Summoner also shows discrepancies within his character. As someone who works for the church he is supposed to be religious and follow the teachings, however, he has his own personal agenda. He likes to have sexual encounters despite him working for the church. He sang a song called "'Come hither, love, come home!' The Summoner sang deep seconds to this song", which represents his lust (Chaucer 692-693). "The song, in this context, becomes both a promiscuous and perverted invitation and an unconscious symbolic acknowledgment of the absence of and the need for love" (Hoffman 12). This exhibits how hypocritical he is even as he brings people in for the same crimes he is committing. Another way the Summoner shows discrepancies is how he turns a blind eye to sinners to answer for their crimes, but instead takes payment from them. "(Unless the rascal's soul were in his purse)/ For in his purse the punishment should be" (Chaucer 674-675). This shows how he didn't necessarily care for the rules as long as he's gained something from it. The Summoner taking bribes doesn't align with his position in the church showing inconsistency. The Summoner's discrepancies show his hypocrisy towards not only the church but the sinners he takes money from.

In conclusion, the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer shows the author's disdain for the Summoner as he attributes him with characteristics of being deceitful, revolting, "lecherous," and horrid. Chaucer shows his extreme distaste for the Summoner and focuses on how his morals are tainted. It can also be said that Summoner's horrific exterior can be a reflection of his behavior in his job. Chaucer seems to disapprove of this character in the way he describes him. Through Chaucer, the Summoner is characterized with alarming features, despicable behavior, and prurient tendencies although he works for the church.