Character Analysis Of The Merchant In The Canterbury Tales

Often times the personality of a character is not initially revealed by the poet to the fullest extent in order to add to the storyline in the poem. Chaucer manifests this idea in The Canterbury Tales, specifically through the life of the Merchant. Through the displaying of the intricate personality and physical traits of the Merchant, as well as incorporating the background of the rising middle class, Chaucer intertwines both the physical and internal attributes to reveal the true nature of the Merchant. In the poem The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer paints a negative view of The Merchant in the general prologue and tale by highlighting his complex attitudes, portraying him to be a sophisticated character with two contradicting sides of himself..

A general conception of the merchant class during the Middle Ages is that they are known to take great care of their appearance to attract customers, boosting their clientele. This is holds true to the Merchant as he had a “forking beard / And a motley dress, high on his horse he [sits]”(280-281). In addition to his other accessories, on top of his head, he wore a “beaver hat / And on his feet daintily buckled boots”(282-283) to perfect his image as a merchant. The Merchant’s mind set is that if his customers believe that if he appears rather wealthy and prosperous, then he is trustworthy, making his products more reliable. Observing from the outside, it is easy to make the assumption that the Merchant is rather wealthy and wholesome; however, he is quite the opposite. The Merchant purposefully presents the desire to obtain the most fashionable and expensive clothing with the intent of reeling his customers into his business to make sales.

During the Middle Ages the middle class, which consists of merchants, had wealth that was both fresh, new, and abundant. As a result, this newfound wealth characterizes the middle class as those with much pride and materialism to fulfill their desires as reflected in the Merchant. According to Thompson, the “new middle classes reflect the introduction of a monetary economy”(4) which is a stage where money supersedes barter in the exchange of goods. As the rise of the merchant class takes its course, the Merchant experiences a tight financial situation of his own during this time due to his abysmal spending habits. Although the Merchant may seem prosperous, it is evident that “he was in debt”(290). Thompson claims that “Chaucer is “satiric when providing information he [cannot] possibly learn in [the Merchant’s] company, such as...the Merchant’s debts”(11-12). It does not explicitly state why the Merchant is exactly in debt; however, it is easily inferable that the cause of his debt is attributed to his lavish spending on materialistic items to fulfill his desires. The inability of the Merchant to focus and prioritize on the important aspects in his life highlights the lack of responsibility he has.

Although the Merchant endlessly boasts about his expertise at money exchanging, pompously sharing his thoughts, “opinions and pursuits”(284) to the pilgrims around, he is not as successful as he may seem. In the Merchant’s tale, “January loses his sight”(Rossignol, 3). In a similar but metaphorical way, the Merchant too does not have sight because he could not see or truly express his true self. The Merchant occupies himself with the idea of trying to look like a successful merchant from the outside. Because of the egotistical quality of the Merchant that emerges from the way he outwardly portrays himself, sporting fashionable attire of the era and appearing neatly groomed, it leads one to believe that the Merchant is successful, directly

correlating with his deceiving nature.

In regards to the aforementioned, the Merchant's deceitful quality translates into his lack of faith in God and Christianity. John M. Fyler believes that the Merchant's "tale debunks all the noble, even sacred ideals it presents"(1), simply because the Merchant has other intentions for embarking on the pilgrimage to Canterbury. The Merchant's thirst for money and constant desire for being deemed a superior merchant outweighs his love for God and his Faith. Thus, it is evident that the merchant went on the Pilgrimage to Canterbury solely just to make money off of the other pilgrims to benefit himself. In addition, the purpose of taking on the journey to Canterbury is to pay respects to Saint Thomas a Becket, who is the Archbishop of Canterbury that has a strong influence on Christianity in England during the time. However, while on the pilgrimage, the Merchant tells a tale that includes two Gods, "Pluto, that is the king of Fairyland [and] his wife, Queen Proserpine"(2227-2229). The fact that the Merchant journeys on a pilgrimage with pilgrims that believe in Christianity, a religion that is monotheistic, while telling a tale that focuses on polytheistic Roman Mythology, indicates that the Merchant does not have strong faith in his own religion, Christianity.

Marriage is significant in both the prologue and the Merchant's tale. The Merchant is suffering in his marriage with his wife; however, despite his constant agony, he continues to remain in his married to his wife. This shows that the Merchant has a weak, unclear mindset, causing him to have conflicting thoughts as seen by comparing his prologue and tale side by side. January, the knight in the Merchant's tale is "as foolish as the Merchant himself "(Fyler, 4) because of the fact they both choose to stay with their wives that are clearly no good for them. "'The Merchant's Tale' is the Merchant's response to the Clerk's story of wifely obedience"(Rossignol, 3) in which Chaucer uses satire to develop the Merchant as a Character, as this is one of the first notable instances where the Merchant seems to be rather contradictory in his thoughts. In the prologue of the Merchant's tale, he reiterates that he is in an unhappy marriage with his wife, "the worst that there [can] be - / For though the devil and she [makes] pair to it"(6-7). Chaucer paints the Merchant out to be a complex character, especially when he demonstrates his hatred for marriage in his prologue and praises marriage in his tale. In the Merchant's tale, he specifically states, "That he for once might know the blissful life / Shared always by a husband and his wife"(48-49), showing that he now believes that marriage is peaceful, special bond that a husband and wife can share in his tale when he previously compared his own wife to the devil in the prologue. Based on the hateful view that the Merchant holds upon marriage seen in the prologue, it further solidifies the fact that the Merchant is complex and has contradictory thoughts.

The negative view of the Merchant painted by Chaucer can be attributed to the intertwining of the negative physical and internal aspects of the Merchant seen in the text. The background of the rising middle class helps to provide engaging insight on the Merchant in England during the Middle Ages. Upon examination of the Merchant's prologue and tale, a detailed understanding of the Merchant as a character can be gathered by analyzing how his actions contribute to the complex development of his character. With regard to the previous statements, it is evident that Chaucer succeeds in revealing the deceitful, dishonest, and prideful nature of the Merchant.