The Social Commentary Within The Pardoner’s Tale

Written between the years 1387 and 1400, “The Canterbury Tales,” is a collection of stories written by the great Geoffrey Chaucer. Told by characters who are on a pilgrimage to none other than Canterbury itself, each person gets their own story to tell to help pass the time. Although some less serious than others, each has a deeper meaning when analyzed further. “The Pardoner’s Tale,” is no expectation. Told by, of course, a pardoner, this is brilliantly written story that has many layers. While on the surface, this is a story told about three young men who get themselves into some trouble, Chaucer creatively hides his social commentary through his comedic writing and the apparent moral dilemmas throughout.

Before the Protestant Reformation in 1517, there was a position in the church called a Pardoner. His job would be to collect money from the congregation and then he would “cleanse” them of their sins. The practice of granting what was called an “indulgence” was a widespread phenomenon within the Catholic church (Britannica). While clearly controversial by today’s standards, very few people thought much about it at the time. Geoffrey Chaucer was one of the people who was not a fan of this practice, which is clearly demonstrated in this story. While irony is used as comedic relief throughout the prologue of the tale, the idea that, “there is truth in every joke,” is very prominent. Throughout the prologue, when the readers actually meet the Pardoner, it is not hard to see his hypocrisy. At the very beginning of the prologue, the Pardoner states in Line 46 that he uses the same text for every sermon he preaches. This is important because while stated in Latin, “Radix malorum, est Cupiditas,” directly translates to: greed is the root of all evil. The readers can gather from past knowledge of history, that this is the first instance of irony, considering the fact that his sole job was to preach a little and take as much money from the congregation as possible, it is clear that he struggles with greed himself. He even admits in Lines 59-64 that after he preaches he brings out his relics which he says have certain powers. He does this solely to entice his congregation to offer money to the “church,” money that he simply pockets for himself. Throughout the prologue, Chaucer uses multiple instances of irony in order to portray his distaste for the corruption within the church. At a time where this was extremely common, people reading this story back in the 12th century might have been somewhat surprised. Because this would have been over 200 years before Martin Luther wrote his 95 theses’ it can be inferred that Chaucer’s writing would have been a completely different viewpoint than that of most people at the time. By making it comedic, as irony is, he allows the reader to make the judgement for themselves which is way of making his point. Chaucer did not want to directly say what was happening but by putting into a story and using irony he leaves it up for question. By definition, a social commentary is, “the act of using rhetorical means to provide commentary on issues in a society” (Word Finder) which is exactly what Chaucer is doing here. He never directly states anything, he uses stories, comedy, and satire in hopes of potentially nudging the reader to his conclusion. It is clever and it is easy to miss. But while subtle it is also extremely important and he felt as though he needed this issue to be brought to the public. Chaucer's ability as a writer allows for pure entertainment on the outside and deep social conversation on the inside.

While the irony of the Pardoner himself is a very important part of the social commentary within this part of the tales, the story itself also plays a big role in portraying Chaucer’s thoughts of the time. Through many subtle clues and inferences the reader can gather a lot of information from

the story. On the surface, the story is pretty basic; three young men get drunk together and after a couple mischievous decisions they all end up dead. It is short, sweet and to the point. Though the most important part is the context in which the Pardoner tells the story. Directly after telling his fellow pilgrims of the dirtiness of the church and his own personal corruption, he readily assures them that he is still able to tell a moral story through his statement in Lines 171-172, “For thought myself be a ful vicious man, A moral tale yit I you telle can” (Chaucer). Chaucer could be making a statement here on humanity as a whole. Even though the Pardoner is a bad person, he still knows right from wrong. The idea that humans are all moral but some choose the wrong path is prevalent here. The story itself is that of great lessons. With its concluding message being sins (gluttony, drunkenness, and lying in this case) will kill you. Even though he ends up taking his followers money, the Pardoner is still technically helping them out even if he does not think he is. To him, the story does not matter, but to the people listening, who do not know how greedy he is, this story can be everything and they all probably live their lives accordingly. It shows that certain people value different things. While Chaucer is subtlety calling out the practice of paying for indulgences, he is also acknowledging that most people don’t really have a problem with it because they do not truly know what is going on. In turn, it can be inferred that people are inherently good. The Pardoner might not know the effect his preaching as on the people and he could actually be helping them live better lives. The three men in the story (possibly representing the patriarchs before the flood; Abel, Enoch, Noah) or the Host objecting to the Pardoner’s offer of cleaning his sin after the tale (possibly representing the inn host sending Mary and Joseph away) are all parts of this story that can be looked at closer. The overall moral dilemma is this; does it matter to people getting lied to if they do not know they are not being told the truth? From the outside, it looks as though those people are getting cheated out of their money, but to them, they are getting saved. What is the right thing to do in that situation? We do not know if anyone knew that answer back then but Chaucer does a wonderful job of starting the conversation.

Throughout this book Chaucer’s insight on life shines through. In some subtle and some not so subtle ways, he leaves his mark on the world through these stories. Is it right to call out the church directly? Is it right to take payments as a pastor? Is it right to tell people they are not living their own lives correctly? How does one change the opinion of a country? These are all questions that Chaucer attempts to bring up through his social commentary within, “The Pardoner’s Tale.” In a beautiful way, he uses comedic irony and moral dilemmas to portray his social commentary all while writing a story, that by itself, is already very entertaining.

Works Cited

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