

Idealism in Geoffrey Chaucer's "General Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to analyze Chaucer's use of idealism in the "General Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales. Idealism is defined as a belief that ideals are the only true reality. Therefore, it stresses the mental or spiritual over the material objects. Idealism is widely used during the Middle Ages, especially by Geoffrey Chaucer, who is England's most famous poet. The Canterbury Tales is his masterpiece. This Research analyzes ideals in the "General Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales. The conclusion of the present research shows that Chaucer uses idealism to criticize the follies and weaknesses of his age. Besides, he finds that adherence to ideal values is a means to cultivate morality leading to perfection.

Keywords: Idealism, Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, "General Prologue".

المثالية في مقدمة جيو فري جوسر لحكايات كانتربري

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الخلاصة

يهدف البحث الحالي الى دراسة المثالية في "المقدمة العامة" لحكايات كانتربري. وقد عرفت المثالية بانها المعتقد الذي يعتبر ان المثاليات هي الواقع الحقيقي للوجود. لذلك فإنها تؤكد على الجانب العقلي او الروحي بدلا من الجوانب المادية الملموسة. استخدمت المثالية على نطاق واسع خلال القرون الوسطى وخاصة من قبل جيو فري جوسر الذي يعتبر من اهم الشعراء الإنكليز واكثرهم شهرة. يقوم هذا البحث بتحليل المثاليات في "المقدمة العامة" لحكايات كانتربري. وقد توصل هذا البحث الى ان جوسر استخدم المثالية لنقد مواطن ضعف وتفاهات المجتمع في عصره. فضلا الى انه يجد بان الالتزام بالقيم بالمثالية هي وسيلة لصقل الاخلاقيات التي تؤدي الى الكمال والارتقاء بالاخلاق المجتمعية. الكلمات المفتاحية: المثالية، جيو فري جوسر، حكايات كانتربري، "المقدمة العامة".

Introduction

"Idealism" is one of the most significant concepts not only in philosophy but in literature as well. It stresses the central role of the ideal or the spiritual in the constitution of the world and in mankind's interpretation of experience.⁽¹⁾ It may hold that the world or reality exists essentially as spirit or consciousness, that abstractions and laws are more fundamental in reality than sensory things, or at least that whatever exists is known to mankind in dimensions that are chiefly mental- that is, through and as ideas.⁽²⁾ Thus, idealism emphasizes the priority of mind over being, thought over things, seeing in the human mind and thought a power to better the world.

Idealism is adopted by many English writers during the Middle Ages (1066- 1485), especially Geoffrey Chaucer (1340- 1400), who is regarded as the "father of English poetry".⁽³⁾ He is England's

most accomplished and influential poet. He was born more than two centuries before Shakespeare, and his works suggest several plots and literary techniques that have participated in making Shakespeare the great dramatist that he has become.⁽⁴⁾

Although Chaucer has many fine works, yet it is for *The Canterbury Tales* (1386- 1400) that his name is best remembered.⁽⁵⁾ It is a collection of stories purportedly told by a diverse company of English men and women on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. Left unfinished on Chaucer's death, the volume includes a prologue and twenty four tales of varying length.⁽⁶⁾ It is an amazing compendium of genres: The romances or courtly tales of love and adventure of high – class men and women; the fabliaux, or comic tales often involving middle – class folk engaged in raunchy misconduct; saints' Legends; moral exempla; religious tales and sermons; confessional narratives; tragedies; allegories; meditations; and even parodies.⁽⁷⁾

In the "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*, which is a stunning piece of work, Chaucer gives a vivid description of each of the pilgrims, their daily lives, the normal habits of thinking, their prejudices, professional bias, most familiar ideas, and personal idiosyncrasies come out in their conversation and their behavior.⁽⁸⁾ Chaucer gives an ironic and satirical picture of most of the pilgrims except for the knight, the Parson, the Plowman and the Clerk who are idealized.

Thus, the aim of this research is to shed the light on Chaucer's use of idealism in the "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*.

The research consists of three sections and a conclusion. Section one is a manifestation of the various definitions of idealism, in philosophy, in ethics and in Literature.

Section Two is a revelation of the concept of idealism during the Middle Ages.

Section Three is an analysis of Chaucer's use of idealism in the "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*, which contains an explanation of idealism in the opening of the "Prologue", in addition to the manifestation of the ideal characters in the "Prologue", such as, the Knight, the Parson, the Plowman and the Clerk.

The conclusion sums up the findings of the research.

1. Idealism

1.1 Idealism in Philosophy:

"Idealism" in its philosophical sense, is the view that mind and spiritual values are fundamental in the world as a whole, according to the definition of H. B. Acton (1967).⁽⁹⁾ Thus, idealism, Acton asserts, is opposed to naturalism that is to the view that mind and spiritual values have emerged from or are reducible to material things and processes.⁽¹⁰⁾ Philosophical idealism, Acton believes is also opposed to realism and is thus the denial of the commonsense realist view that material things exist independently of being perceived.⁽¹¹⁾

The word "idealism" is derived from the Greek word "idea" as A. Pablo Iannone confirms, which simply means something seen, or the look of something.⁽¹²⁾ Plato (428- 347 B.C.) used the word as a technical term of his philosophy to mean a universal (such as whiteness) in contrast to a particular (such as something white) or to mean an ideal limit or standard (such as absolute Beauty) in contrast to the things that approximate or conform to it (such as the more or less beautiful things).⁽¹³⁾ According to Plato an Idea, or Form, is apprehended by the intellect, does not exist in time, and cannot come into existence or cease to exist as temporal things do and is hence more real than they are.⁽¹⁴⁾ Whereas, in medieval philosophy, Anthony Kenny believes that, Ideas or Forms were regarded as patterns in accordance with which God conceived of thing and created them, and hence they were thought of as existing in the mind of God.⁽¹⁵⁾ René Descartes (1596- 1650) used the word "idea" for thoughts existing in human mind.⁽¹⁶⁾ John Locke (1632- 1704) in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690),

used the word “idea” for perceptions of “sensible qualities” conveyed into the mind by the senses.⁽¹⁷⁾ Thus, the word “idea” was used variously to mean a form in the Platonic sense, a Form as apprehended in the mind of God or by the human mind.⁽¹⁸⁾

The term “idealism” was first used philosophically by the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646- 1716) to denote Platonic thought and contrast it with empiricism.⁽¹⁹⁾ It was then used by many other philosophers after him. Besides, many schools of idealist philosophy emerged, ranging from extreme objectivism, as represented by Plato and G. W. Hegel (1770- 1831) to extreme subjectivism identified with George Berkeley (1684- 1753) and D. Hume (1711- 1776).⁽²⁰⁾

1.2. Idealism in Ethics

In ethics, idealism is defined as the pursuit of the ideal.⁽²¹⁾ Connie S. Rosati shows that ideals are models of excellence.⁽²²⁾ They can be ‘substantive’ or ‘deliberative’.⁽²³⁾ Substantive ideals present models of excellence against which things in a relevant class can be assessed, such as models of the just society or the good person, as Rosati asserts.⁽²⁴⁾ Deliberative ideals present models of excellent deliberation, leading to correct or warranted ethical conclusions.⁽²⁵⁾ Ideals figure in ethics in two opposed ways.⁽²⁶⁾ Most Certainly, Rosati believes, ideals serve to justify ethical judgments and to guide people in how to live.⁽²⁷⁾ Sometimes, however, ideals may conflict with moral demands, thereby testing the limits of morality.⁽²⁸⁾ Rosati considers ideals as fundamental in the development of ethical theories.⁽²⁹⁾

1.3. Idealism in Literature

In literature “Idealism” is defined by Julien D. Bonn as, the artistic theory or practice that affirms the pre-eminent values of ideas and imagination, as compared with the faithful portrayal of nature in realism.⁽³⁰⁾ An idealist attempts to give a perfect picture of life, “Life as it might or should be”, unlike the realist who shows the world as it presently is.⁽³¹⁾ As Ian Chilvers says:

... a true artist is conceived as a seer who gazes upon eternal verities and reveals them to mortal men. It is this gift that separates him from the mere mechanics, the slavish copyist of appearance.⁽³²⁾

2. Idealism in the Middle Ages:

During the Middle Ages, the Church’s “other – worldly” disposition tended to subordinate the position of literature and arts to the more pressing issues of salvation and preparation for the next life.⁽³³⁾ In general, the widespread instability, insecurity and illiteracy intensified religious feeling promoted ideals of withdrawal from the world, condemning earthly life as worthless and merely a means of passage to the next life, to eternal salvation and bliss.⁽³⁴⁾ The early Church harbored a metaphysical idealism descended in part from Plato, insisting that reality is spiritual and that sense- perception and observation of the world of matter was not rejected as unreal but was admitted into the divine scheme of creation, occupying nonetheless a humble position.⁽³⁵⁾ The beauty of earthly things was viewed as an expression of their divine origin, and rested on their unity- a unity in diversity, which imitated the oneness of God.⁽³⁶⁾ This relation expressed the medieval Christian vision of the One and the Many: It is Ultimately God’s Unity which confers unity and harmony on the vast diversity of the world.⁽³⁷⁾ The world is “God’s poem which proclaims its beauty through harmony and correct proportion.”⁽³⁸⁾ One of the most influential Christian philosophers who participated in forming the idealistic view during the Middle Ages was St. Augustine (354 – 430), along with John Scottus Eriugena (C. 800- C. 877) and Anselm of Canterbury (1033- 1109).⁽³⁹⁾

Thus, Christian virtues, such as faith, hope, and charity, which is “the form of all virtues”, besides prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude came to be the ideal virtues that one should strive to attain.⁽⁴⁰⁾

3. Idealism in Chaucer’s “General Prologue” to The Canterbury Tales.

3.1. Idealism in the Opening of the “Prologue”.

3.1.1. Spring.

The “General Prologue” opens with an ideal picture of spring. Chaucer describes nature opening to spring. It is a time when the pleasant showers of April pierce the draught of March and bathe every vein in liquor that engenders the flower. Zephyrus sweet breath quickens the tender shoots. It is a mating season and the birds sleep all night with an open eye.

What that April with his shouressote
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swichlicour
Of which vertu engendered is the flour;
Whan Zephyrus eek with his swetebreeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendrecropes, and the Yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours y-ronne
And smale flowers maken melodye,
That slepen al the night with open ye*⁽⁴¹⁾

According to the Constance Woo and William Matthews, it is a time when nature experiences a physical regeneration.⁽⁴²⁾ But it is also a time when men and women begin to think of spiritual regeneration: “Thanlongen folk to goon on Pilgrimages” (12). The two regenerations are in fact inter-related.⁽⁴³⁾ The water that renews plants and flowers also suggests baptism and spiritual regeneration.⁽⁴⁴⁾

3.1.2 The Pilgrimage

The Pilgrimage in the “General Prologue” represents a quest for an ideal. It is a spiritual journey to a shrine or a sacred place undertaken to gain divine aid, as an act of thanksgiving or penance, or to demonstrate devotion.⁽⁴⁵⁾ It is an escape from the world of matter and a return to the divine world.⁽⁴⁶⁾ As Gregory Nazianzen (329- 390) one of the greatest theologians of the early church believes that, the pilgrimage symbolizes a “spiritual journey a way from maternity towards a kind of spiritual luminosity or refinement.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ Thus, the pilgrims of The Canterbury Tales assemble at the Tabard Inn, which is the most worldly place, where wine and the company of others is enjoyed, and are heading to Canterbury Cathedral where the shrine of St. Thomas Becket lies, which is considered as the most otherworldly and holy place.

On the other hand, some critics believe that, Chaucer’s basis for The Canterbury Tales may come from the idea that, “life is a pilgrimage which mankind make to the shrine of Heaven”.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Chaucer’s Parson himself links the pilgrimage to Canterbury with the pilgrimage of life.⁽⁴⁹⁾ It is a journey undertaken in obedience to Divine Love.

3.1.3. Martyrdom

Saint Thomas Becket (1118- 1170) of Canterbury is a “holy, blissful martyr” (17), who is killed for opposing the anti- Catholic views of king Henry II of England and is venerated by the Catholic Church as a Saint and a martyr for the cause of Christianity.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The word ‘martyr’ comes from the Greek ‘martus’ which means ‘witness’.⁽⁵¹⁾ Martyrdom symbolizes the highest Christian ideal of sacrifice and devotion.⁽⁵²⁾ Martyrs are those who suffer hardship and death instead of denying their

religion. ⁽⁵³⁾ Thus, they become united with God, and can intercede for believers on earth. ⁽⁵⁴⁾ The burial places of martyrs are focuses of devotion where Christians can both pray for help, derive inspiration for their own lives and collectively, can continually reaffirm the flow of tradition within which each particular Christian community finds its identity. ⁽⁵⁵⁾

3.2 Ideal Characters in the “Prologue”

3.2.1. The Knight

The Knight is an ideal representative of chivalry. ⁽⁵⁶⁾ The word ‘chivalry’ takes its name from ‘chivalier’ the French for “knight”. ⁽⁵⁷⁾ It refers to the life style and moral code followed by medieval knights. ⁽⁵⁸⁾ Its values are a blend of military, social and Christian ethics, such as valor, courtesy and purity as well as loyalty to a Lord or cause. ⁽⁵⁹⁾ Chaucer’s Knight is “a worthy man” (43), because he embodies the ideals of chivalry which surpass in nobility all other virtues:

... he loved Chivalrie,

Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie. (45- 46)

Besides being ‘worthy’, the Knight is also ‘wys’ (68). Wise means ‘prudent’. ⁽⁶⁰⁾ Prudent is defined by the great Christian theologians, Augustine and Aquinas as, the intellectual virtue which directs the human person to the choice of right means for an ends. ⁽⁶¹⁾ It is an application to Christian love, Aquinas adds, which is closely related to justice and charity. ⁽⁶²⁾

Another feature that conforms to the Knight being a “Verrayparfitgentilknyght” is his meekness.

And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.

He never yet no vileynye ne sayde

In al his lyf unto no manerwight. (69-71)

There never issues from his mouth a boorish word, however much he may be full of anger or wrath. ⁽⁶³⁾

For, he has a manner gentler than that of a lady or a girl. ⁽⁶⁴⁾

In addition to his ideal qualities, the Knight is also an excellent fighter. He has survived so many battles.

At Alisaundre he was, whan it was wonne;

Fuloftetyme he hadde the bordbigonne

Above allenaciouns in Pruce;

In Lettowhadde he reysed and in Ruce;

No Cristen man so ofte of his degree;

In Gernade at the sege eek hadde he be

Of Algezir , and riden in Belmarye;

At Lyeys was he , and at satalye,

Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete see

At many a noble armeehadde he be.

At mortal batailleshadde he been fiftene,

And foughten for our feith at Tramissene

In listesthryes, and say slayn hisfo.

This ilke worthy knight had been also

Somtyme with the lord of Palatye,

Ageyn another hethen in Turkye: (51-66)

Yet, the battles that he has participated in, as Jill Mann comments, are all against heathens. ⁽⁶⁵⁾ He has obeyed the commands of Pope Urban that, “the good knight should take arms only against the infidel”, which makes him a ‘fighter for God’, as Mann believes. ⁽⁶⁶⁾ He is therefore, not only an ideal knight but, an ideal crusading knight. ⁽⁶⁷⁾

The Knight's adherence to the ideals of Chivalry is also implied by his simple and sober appearance.⁽⁶⁸⁾

But, for to tellen you of his array,
His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.
Of fustian he wored a gypon
Al bismotered with his habergeon,
For he was late ycome from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrimage. (73- 78)

Although he possesses a good and strong horse, yet, it is simply decked. He, himself wore a doublet of coarse cloth which, at the time of his setting out on his pilgrimage, is all soiled by his coat of mail, because he has recently returned from a voyage of adventure.⁽⁶⁹⁾ The Knight's modest appearance is a satire against the adornments of secular knights, the trapping of their horses and armor, the decoration of their shields and spears, as Mann points out.⁽⁷⁰⁾

William Blake (1757- 1827) comments on Chaucer's Knight saying that, "the Knight is a true hero, a good, great and wise man,"⁽⁷¹⁾ His full-length portrait on horse-back, as written by Chaucer, cannot be surpassed.⁽⁷²⁾ He has spent his life in the field: he has ever been a conqueror, and belongs to that species of character which in every age stands as the guardian of man against the oppressor.⁽⁷³⁾

3.2.2. The Parson

The Parson is an ideal representative of priesthood. He possesses all the virtues that are associated with the 'Pastoral ideals', as Mann confirms.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Although he is poor in a worldly sense, yet, he is rich in holy thoughts and holy work.

A good man was ther of religion,
And was a poure persoun of a Toun;
But riche he was of hooly thought and werk; (479- 481)
He is a man of learning. He truly preaches the gospel of Christ and sincerely looks after the spiritual welfare of his flock.
He was also a learned man, a clerk,
That Cristes Gospel trewely wolde preche:
His parissshens devoutly wolde he teche. (482- 484)

Many times, he has proved himself to be patient, diligent and benign.
Benygne he was, and wonder diligent,
And in adversitee fulpacient. (485- 486)

He will not currently excommunicate a man who is genuinely unable to meet the ten percent tax levied by the Church on every parishioner. For, according to Muriel Bowden, to be excommunicated or "cursed" meant to be cut off from all communion with the Church; if one is not reinstated, eternal damnation will result.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Yet, the Parson knows, however, that it is his duty to collect the tithes; consequently, in cases of need, he will make up the deficit out of his own small 'substance', or even out of the 'offryng', the voluntary contributions which, by rights, he should spend upon his own needs.

And swich he was y- pervedoftesythes.
Fullooth were him to cursen for his tythes,
But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute,
Unto his povre parissshens aboute
Of his offring and eek of his substance.
He coude in litel thing hansuffisaunce. (487- 492)

He does not only refuse to curse his parishioners but, he also gives donations to those who are in need. Mann describes him as “a compassionate protector of the poor”.⁽⁷⁶⁾

This good man, as Bowden calls him, is not lazy or given to idle pleasure: on the contrary, in all kinds of weather, and even if he is in trouble or ill, he visits on foot the members of his parish in their houses ‘ferasonder,’ not caring whether those he calls upon are rich or poor.⁽⁷⁷⁾

Wyd was his parisshe, and houses ferasonder,
But he ne laftenat, for reyn ne thonder
In siknes nor in meschief, to visyte
The ferreste in his parisshe, mucheand lyte,
Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf. (493- 497)

He sets a noble example for his parishioners, by actually practicing what he preaches. As Chaucer says: “First he wroghte, and afterword he taught” (499). He holds to two figures: if gold rusts, iron will do far worse; and if the shepherd is soiled, the sheep cannot be clean.⁽⁷⁸⁾

That if gold ruste, what shaliren do?
For if a preest be foul, on whom wetruste,
No wonder is a lewed man to ruste;
And shame it is, if a preest take keep,
A shitenshephered and a clene sheep.
Weloghte a preest ensample for to sheep.
By his clenness how that his sheep should live. (502-510)

The Parson’s example is a satire that Chaucer uses against the corrupted priests who do as opposed of what they teach.⁽⁷⁹⁾ As Mann says. “Like priest, like people.”

He does not treat sinners with contempt nor is he haughty and superior in his language.
He was to sinful men natdespitous,
Ne of his speech daungerous ne digne, (518 -519)

He will, nonetheless, reprove and rebuke the obstinate regardless of their rank.

But it were any persone obstinate,
What- so he were, of heigh or lowe estate,
Him wolde he snibben sharply for the nones.(523-525)

He is unlike the corrupted priests, who fail to attack the vices of the rich and powerful.⁽⁸¹⁾

The Parson does not let out his own office for hire, leaving the parishioners to sink into sin, as other priests do.⁽⁸²⁾ He does not go to St. Paul’s Cathedral in London in order to work as a singer of masses for the souls of others, nor does he try to make extra money by working as a priest in the service of some guild.⁽⁸³⁾

He settenat his benefice to hyre
And leet his sheep encombred in the myre
And ran to London, un-to SeintePoules,
To seken him a chaunterie for soules,
Or with a bretherhed to been withholde, (509- 513)

But, instead, he lives in his own parish and looks after his parishioners to prevent them from falling under the influence of the enemies of the Church.⁽⁸⁴⁾ He...

...dwelte at hoom and keptewel his folde,
So that the wolf ne made it natmiscarir
He was a shepherde and nomercenarie. (514-516)

The Parson's adherence to true values' is contrasted with the "false values' of the other pilgrims. ⁽⁸⁵⁾ Unlike the Friar, he is not 'daungerous' to anyone, nor does he respect 'heighestat'; unlike the Sergeant of Law, he does not receive 'reverence' from others, and his 'fairness' is of a different kind from the Monk's. ⁽⁸⁶⁾

Chaucer not only presents the Parson as an ideal figure but also as a blood-relative of the Plowman. ⁽⁸⁷⁾ This ideal relationship in which two social classes, the clergy and the laborers, are connected is used as a basis for judging the self-limited worlds of the other pilgrims. ⁽⁸⁸⁾ Furthermore, it suggests the Christian idea that all men are brothers. ⁽⁸⁹⁾

William Blake comments on the Parson saying that, he is an apostle, a real messenger of heaven, sent in every age for its light and its warmth. ⁽⁹⁰⁾ This man is beloved and venerated by all, and neglected by all. ⁽⁹¹⁾ He serves all and is served by none, he is the greatest of his age. Yet, he is a poor parson of a town. ⁽⁹²⁾

3.2.3. The Plowman

The Plowman is an ideal representative of the laboring class. ⁽⁹³⁾ He epitomizes the noble qualities of labor. ⁽⁹⁴⁾ Chaucer describes him as an honest hard worker, who attends readily to the unpleasant agricultural tasks of spreading manure, digging and ditching. ⁽⁹⁵⁾

That hadde Y-lad of dong ful many afother.
A treweswinker and a good was he, ... (532-533)

He lives "in pees and pafitcharite" (534), that he loves God always and neighbors as himself and that he will always help- without payment- any poor creature in difficulty.

God loved he best with al his hole herte
At alletymes, thogh him gamed or smerte,
And thane his neighebour right as himselve.
He woldethresshe, and therto dyke and delve,
For Cristes sake, for every povrewight,
Withoutenhyre, if it lay in his might. (535-540)

Mann comments that, some virtues which the peasant is traditionally supposed to strive for can be inferred from complaints about his failings. For the 'pees' in which Chaucer's Plowman conducts his life may represent the reverse of the quarrelsome sometimes associated with the peasantry, and his love of God, 'with all his hooleherte', may be an inversion of the peasant's supposed hatred of the Church and the clergy, and his failure to observe Sunday, and religious festivals. ⁽⁹⁶⁾

The Plowman paid his tithes in a perfectly honest manner.

His tithes payed he ful fair and wel,
Bothe of his propreswynk and his catel. (541-542)

According to Mann, the most important sign of the peasant's hatred of the Church is his failure to tithe, and Chaucer's Plowman clearly conforms with the stereotype of the ideal peasant in paying his tithes 'ful faire and wel'. ⁽⁹⁷⁾

Finally, the Plowman is described as humbly dressed. ⁽⁹⁸⁾ He wears tabard and rides on a mare. The mare is an inferior mount, and the tabard is a humble dress. ⁽⁹⁹⁾ He represents simplicity itself, as William Blake points out, with wisdom and strength for its stamina. ⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ Benevolence is the Plowman's great characteristics; he is thin with excessive labor, and not with old age. ⁽¹⁰¹⁾

Thus, as Daniel F. Pigg asserts, Chaucer's Plowman stands as a testimony of one who has fought with the elements of nature, of self, and of society and has been successful in establishing "pees and

parfitcharitee.”⁽¹⁰²⁾ Bowden believes that the Plowman represents Chaucer’s wish as to what peasants should be in actuality.⁽¹⁰³⁾

3.2.4 The Clerk

The Clerk is an ideal representative of the life of study.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ As Ann Astell asserts, the Clerk represents the learned ‘litterati’ who were at once ecclesiastical and secular.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ He is an ideal medieval scholar as Bert Dillion believes.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ He has devoted himself to the serious study of logic, which forms the back-bone of the four to eight years required for Oxford medieval curriculum, as Bowden acknowledges, and it is not surprising that the Clerk would rather have twenty volumes of Aristotle than the material comforts that seem to have been far more important to most students.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

For him was lever have at his beddes heed

Twenty bokes, clad in blak or reed,

Of Aristotle and his philosophye,

Than robes riches, or fithle , or gay sautrye.(295-298)

Study dominates the Clerk’s life; he takes ‘moost cure and moostheede’ of it, and spend all his meagre income on books and on learning. Because of his commitment to learning, the Clerk has not been awarded a church benefice, nor has he got a job or a worldly office that employs someone who can read and write.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ Therefore, like many poor scholars, the Clerk is reduced to begging or becoming a servitor to a college or a particular matter to a well-to-do student.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ But, any money he gets he spends on books or fees. Chaucer also reports that the Clerk seeks to repay some of his debts by saying prayers for those who give him school money.

But al be that he was a philosophre,

Yet hadde he but litel gold in cofre;

But al that he mighte of his freendeshente,

On bookes and on learning he itspente,

And bisilygan for the soulespreye

Of hem that yaf him wherwith to scoleye.

Of studie took he most cure and mostehede.(299-305)

The Clerk’s extreme poverty is reflected on his outer visage. He is thin and hollow-cheeked. His horse, too, is lean and Chaucer compares the beast to a rake.

As leene was his horsas is a rake,

And he was nat right fat, I undertake,(289-290)

Here the Clerk is contrasted to the fat Monk and his well-fed horse.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ The Clerk’s cloak is quite worn-out, “fulthredbar was his overestcourtepy” (292), which is natural in his case.⁽¹¹¹⁾

The Clerk is ‘sober’ and ‘self-restrained’. He never displays unseemly levity in behavior.⁽¹¹²⁾ He does not speak one word more than is necessary, and when he does speak, he is brief, to the point and always noble in his meaning.

Noghtoword spak he more than was neede,

And that was seyde in forme and reverence,

And short and quyke and ful of hy sentence.(306-308)

Chaucer is satirizing intellectual pride, “the scholar’s garrulous tongue.”⁽¹¹³⁾

Thus, the Clerk is unlike the Monk, for studying (i.e. pouring over books) is of paramount importance to him, and unlike the Friar, he is brief and decorous in his speech.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ However, like his ideal counterpart the Parson, the Clerk is morally upright and just as the Parson practices what he preaches, so the Clerk teaches what he learns and vice versa, as Chaucer says: “And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teach”(310).

Conclusion

Evidence of idealism is obviously depicted in the “General Prologue” to the Canterbury Tales. The “General Prologue” opens with an ideal revelation of spring that motivates the pilgrims to go on a pilgrimage seeking salvation and eternal happiness. Besides, Chaucer introduces several ideal characters, such as the Knight, whose portrait stresses his heroic character, his bravery in battles, and his gracious manner: “He was a verrayparfit, gentil Knight” (72). The Parson, for all his lack of worldly riches, possesses two far more valuable assets –his love of Christ and his love of his fellow man. Furthermore, he is wise enough to understand the transitory nature of mere earthly pleasures: “That if gold ruste , what shaliren do?”(502). Chaucer stresses, too, diligence and integrity with which the parson carries out his priestly duties. His brother, the Plowman, is a manual laborer who dig ditches and carries dung; yet he, too, is “living in pees and parfitcharitee” (534), working willingly to help the poor, even without pay.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ The Clerk is an ideal representative of the life of study. He gladly learns and gladly teaches.

In depicting models of excellence and perfection, Chaucer is first, trying to criticize the foibles, obsessions and corruption of his society. Secondly, he is trying to show that, adherence to ideal standards of behavior cultivates moral values and assist in solving all human problems, making life a perfect and noble place to live.

Notes

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