A Stereotypically Unsettling Guy: The Pardoner

Geoffrey Chaucer provides a brief description for each character within his General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, giving the audience the slightest of orientation as to their qualities, desires, and appearances before the journey begins. Chaucer the author does not offer these descriptions directly, but instead filters them through the lens of a narrator. By creating a fictional character to assess the pilgrims, Chaucer creates a buffer zone of safety in which snarky social commentary can be made without fear of retaliation. While the narrator provides the direct description of the Pardoner, which is not the most flattering, Chaucer’s own negative opinion is felt pulsing beneath this portrayal, revealed by the passage’s focus on the Pardoner’s unsavory appearance and actions.

The “I” in the poem describes the Pardoner’s appearance before any of his other qualities - an initial comment is made, and then immediately qualified in the next line. For example, though “this pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wex / smothe it heeng as doth a strike of flex”. Despite having a nice shade of hair it is ghoulish and wispy, seeming rather creepy and unnatural to the narrator. Though he should be wearing a humble hood, the Pardoner displays his bizarre head of hair pridefully, indicating his lack of adherence to his religious duty. We are then told of his eyes - “glarynge eyen hadde he as an hare.” - which possess a discomforting animalistic opaqueness. These off-putting characteristics point towards the sly scheming that the Pardoner pursues in his occupation; he openly accuses people of sin and defilement to cheat them of their money, all while damning greed and selfishness. The Pardoner’s vilification is a part of Chaucer’s estate satire, in which he criticizes people’s general failure to perform their expected societal roles. By channeling the narrator’s description around the unpleasant characteristics of the Pardoner, which refer to his seedy interior, Chaucer himself reveals a disdain for the moral corruption that plagued the church hierarchy within his time.

Though Chaucer is not utterly direct in his criticism of the Pardoner, the narrators comments and Chaucer’s focus cause the Pardoner to appear in a less-than-flattering light to an attentive audience. Appearance was very important in the Canterbury Tales, as the outward aesthetics of a person was meant to indicate the “cleanliness” or “purity” of their inner personality and morality, and the Pardoner’s natural appearance is anything but pleasing. Despite sporting a cape that bears an image of Jesus Christ, the Pardoner cannot hide the ghoulishness of his physical form, and manifests the greedy sinfulness that comprises his moral self. While the narrator assesses this form directly, and is not *too* harsh in his appraisal, Chaucer’s own opinion of the man is expressed less directly, and must be gleaned through the passage’s focus on on appearances and actions.