

. Chaucer's Art or Technique of Characterization?

OR

Q. Reasons of Chaucer's being a great Painter of English Literature

Chaucer outlines his thirty pilgrims in "The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales". He is the first great painter of characters in English Literature. He has painted the whole of English nation during the fourteen the century, ranging from knightly class to the order of Clergymen. **The Character sketches are brief, yet lucid and comprehensive. Both the in and out of the characters are depicted in such a superb way that the entire personality seems moving before the reader's eyes.** It is infect Chaucer's unique rich and original art of characterization that has enabled him to delineate memorable portraits. For the purpose he employs several techniques of characterization, some of whom were popular among the contemporaries, while the others are purely his own.

### I. Characterization by theory of Humor

One of the major techniques of characterization which was current in the medieval authors was the theory of humor. **This theory divided personalities according to the pre-dominance of one of the elements-fire, water, air and earth. For example, his character was dominated by humor of blood, which on its turn was understood to produce a large appetite and pleasure in physical satisfaction.** Thus, the entire portrait of the Franklin, is just an elaboration of single phrase "Sanguine".

### 2. Characterization by Physiognomy

Similarly, the medieval poets usually described their character through their physiognomy, **to expose their inner spiritual health.** Chaucer has successfully employed this technique in the case of the **Summoner.** His **"Fire red cherubim face", "Pimples", "Narrow eyes" and "scabby black brows" reflect his inner spiritual corruption.** Description through **physical features** is also employed in the case of **The Wife of the Bath** and **The Prioress.** Closely connected with this is Chaucer's technique of character portrait through dress. It also help the audience in understanding, recognizing and differentiating the pilgrims. The Prioress and the Wife of Bath's fashionable dresses reveal their materialism and amorous nature. Admittedly, Chaucer varies his presentation from the full length portraits to the thumb nail sketch.

### 3. Characterization by Individual and Type Method

Chaucer's most superb technique is his presentation of Characters as individuals and types. **The Characters are not only representatives of their respective classes and professions but also at the same time they possess individual traits.** For example, **the Friar is a typical** representative of his class in the 14th century; he is **corrupt, hypocritical, greedy and callous.** But his good voice, his twinkling eyes, his white neck and above all his name "Brother Hubert" all have individualistic touches. The Old Knight, stands for heroism and manliness that good knight would always show on the battlefield. But he has

been individualized by his prudence and his weakness of behavior. The Prioress is the type of a woman who is an epicure but she is portrayed as an individual, with her meticulous care in eating and her courtly manners as well as care in eating and her courtly manners as well as her tenderness of heart. The Monk is the type of Monks of those-times interested not in religion and the study of holy books, but in hunting. But Chaucer's Monk is an individual with bald head and rolling eyes, glowing like the fire under a cauldron. The Oxford Clerk is the type of good scholars, not interested in worldly glory, but in the advancement of knowledge and learning. But Chaucer's Oxford Clerk comes as a figure of individual, by his learning, his hollow-cheeks, grave look and his threadbare cloak. In short Chaucer's characters are types as well as individuals.

#### **4. Characters are real and universal**

Chaucer's characters are real and universal because no one is like them, and they are real and universal because they are so like us. His people are always on move. Never do they become shadowy or lifeless. They shout and swear, laugh and weep, interrupt the story teller, pass compliments and in general behave themselves, as we might expect them to be.

#### **5. Characterization by profession of Characters**

Another portrait delineations technique which Chaucer uses is to define the characters to a great or lesser extent by the job or profession, they do. The deferent pilgrims represent different professions. The War-like Elements is represented by the Knight, The Squire, and Yeoman. The Ploughman, The Miller, the Reeve, and The Franklin typify agriculture. The Sargent of Law, the Doctor, The Oxford Clerk represent liberal professions. The Wife of Bath, The weaver, The Dyer and The Tapicer, embody industry and trade, the Merchant and the Shipman personate commerce. The poor Village person and the Summoner represent the secular clergy, while the monastic order are represented by the Monk, The Prioress and the Pardoner.

#### **6. Characterization by vices of Characters**

Chaucer also presents a vivid picture of his characters by their vices and presents the fourteenth century in "The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales", Firstly, the prevalent corruption of the Church is mirrored in most of his ecclesiastical figures, like The Friar, The Monk, The Pardoner. Secondly, the greed of doctors is typified in his Doctor of Physic, who loves gold. Thirdly his Sargeant of Law is as shrewd hard-boiled as other members of his profession. Fourthly, the dishonesty of the Reeve and the Miller is also typical. Finally, their traditional enmity is reflected between the Reeve and the Miller. This technique enriches his art of characterization

#### **7. Characterization by Irony and Satire**

Irony and Satire are undoubtedly Chaucer's most prominent techniques of characterization. Chaucer treats noble fellows with sympathy and love but his treatment of knaves, rogues and rascals either humorous or ironical or satirical. For example, Chaucer call the Wife of Bath "worthy woman" and then in the very next line ironically qualifies the word "worthy" by commenting

“She was worthy woman all her lyve

Husbands at church door she had five”

But it remains to be noted that though he depicts most of his characters ironically and humorously yet tolerance and sympathy never lose Chaucer’s attention. The characters whom he detests and censures are the two corrupts church offices, the Summoner and The Pardoner . It is in case o these two characters that Chaucer employs satire as a technique of characterization. The goodness of the “Gentle rascal” becomes clear when Chaucer comments that just for a quart of wine he would allow a sinner to keep on committing sins.

### **8. Chaucer’s use of Contrast**

Chaucer utilizes the technique of contrast in drawing the portraits of the pilgrims. The good and the bad rub shoulders together. We have paragon of virtue in the characters of the Parson and The Ploughman, we have monsters of vice in the characters of the Reeve, The Miller and the Summoner. The knight, is foil to his son, the lusty Squire; the Oxford Clerk, is the very opposite of the merrymaking Monk. In this way Chaucer distinguishes the characters through the exhibition of dissimilar qualities.

### **Chaucer a detached Observer**

Chaucer’s art of characterization is free from personal bias. He portrays his characters, objectively, impartially and disinterestedly. He depicts what he sees personally. He has the seeing eye, the memory, the judgment to select and the capacity to expound.

### **Conclusion**

Lastly, two conclusions may be drawn from the above discussion of Chaucer’s art of Characterization. His world of man is varied and wide. In the words of **Dryden** . “**There is God’s plenty**” and secondly, it is through the depiction of his characters, Chaucer has managed to give an expression to his vision of life which is both joyous and realistic.