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The Friar In Canterbury Tales

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Unveiling the Friar: Chaucer’s Masterful Satire in The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is a cornerstone of English literature, celebrated for its vibrant tapestry of medieval life. Among the thirty pilgrims journeying to the shrine of Thomas Becket, few characters are as memorable or as morally ambiguous as the Friar. Known as Hubert in the General Prologue, The Friar in Canterbury Tales is not a figure of pious devotion but a complex portrait of corruption, charm, and institutional failure. Chaucer’s depiction of this wandering churchman is a razor-sharp satire that exposes the gap between religious ideals and human frailty. Understanding the Friar is essential for anyone seeking to grasp Chaucer’s critique of the medieval Church, his use of irony, and his timeless ability to create characters that feel startlingly real. This article explores every facet of the Friar—from his physical description and behavior to the tale he tells—revealing why he remains one of the most fascinating figures in the English literary canon.

The Friar’s Identity and Role in the Pilgrimage

In the General Prologue, Chaucer introduces the Friar as a "wantowne and a merye" man, a limiter who is licensed to beg in a specific district. The Friar’s official title is Brother Hubert, and his primary duty should be to serve the poor, offer confession, and live a life of apostolic poverty. Instead, Chaucer presents a man who has twisted every aspect of his vocation for personal gain. The Friar in Canterbury Tales is a study in contradictions: he is supposed to be humble, yet he is proud of his fine clothes and social status; he is meant to be poor, but he knows how to turn a profit from every interaction.

As a limiter, the Friar had the exclusive right to beg in a certain territory, but Chaucer shows him using this position to extract money rather than to minister. He is also a "maister" or a licensed preacher, which gives him authority he abuses. On the pilgrimage itself, the Friar is jovial and conversational, quick with a song and eager to curry favor with the more prosperous pilgrims. His role in the group is to provide comic relief and sharp contrast to other religious figures, such as the humble Parson. The Friar’s presence immediately raises questions about authenticity, integrity, and the commercialization of faith.

Physical Description and Personality

Chaucer’s physical description of the Friar is telling. He has a "neck white as a lily" and is described as strong and well-built. His eyes twinkle, and he is known for his "daliaunce and fair language." This is not an ascetic man worn down by fasting or prayer. The Friar in Canterbury Tales is a man of the world, comfortable in taverns and more familiar with innkeepers than with the sick or the destitute. He wears a "tippet" (a hood) stuffed with knives and pins for trading, betraying his mercantile nature.

His personality is outgoing, manipulative, and deeply self-serving. He is a skilled negotiator—Chaucer notes that he could arrange marriages and settle disputes for a fee. The Friar is beloved by the wealthy because he absolves them of their sins in exchange for donations, effectively selling forgiveness. He is also a champion of the "faire wyves," suggesting a lecherous streak that contradicts his vows of chastity. In short, the Friar is a

consummate performer, using charm and religious authority to mask a life of indulgence.

The Corruption of the Friar: A Breakdown of His Vows

The Friar in Canterbury Tales represents a profound betrayal of the three key vows of the mendicant orders: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Chaucer systematically dismantles each ideal through his portrait of Hubert.

- Vow of Poverty: The Friar should live without property, relying on alms. Instead, he uses begging as a business. He collects "pens" from the poor and the rich alike, and he gives "a certeyn ferme" (a fixed rent) to his order, keeping the surplus. He dresses in expensive cloth, not coarse wool.
- Vow of Chastity: The Friar is described as knowing the taverns well and being a "squier" to women. He is "lyk a maide" in his appearance to attract female attention. His role in arranging marriages and his familiarity with women strongly implies a violation of his chastity vows.
- Vow of Obedience: The Friar answers to his order and the Pope, yet he acts autonomously. He has a papal "bull" (a license) that he shows off to legitimize his actions, but he uses it as a tool for extortion. He disobeys the spirit of his calling by avoiding the poor and leprous, preferring the company of those who can pay.

Chaucer’s critique is not anti-religious; it is anti-hypocrisy. The Friar is condemned not because he is a churchman, but because he uses the Church as a shield for greed and lust. This theme of institutional corruption was a growing concern in the late 14th century, and Chaucer voiced it with wit and subtlety.

The Friar’s Tale: A Story of Greed and Damnation

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of The Friar in Canterbury Tales is the tale he chooses to tell. After a heated exchange with the Summoner, the Friar tells a story that mirrors his own profession’s vices while viciously attacking his rival. The Friar’s Tale is a moral exemplum about a corrupt summoner (a church official who summons people to ecclesiastical court).

Plot Summary of The Friar’s Tale

The tale follows a Summoner who is a master of extortion. He blackmails and threatens people, collecting bribes to ignore their sins. One day, he meets a yeoman who is actually a devil in disguise. The Summoner, not realizing who he is, joins forces with him. They travel together, and the Summoner gleefully corrupts everyone he meets, claiming to be "God’s own officer."

Eventually, they come across a rude carter who curses his stuck cart, saying, "The devil take it!" The Summoner urges the devil to take the cart, but the devil refuses, noting that the curse was not meant sincerely. Later, the Summoner attempts to extort a poor widow. She refuses to pay, and in her righteous anger, she curses him to the devil. This time, the curse is heartfelt, and the devil drags the Summoner to hell. The moral is clear: those who abuse their spiritual authority will face eternal damnation.

Irony and Self-Reflection

The irony of The Friar’s Tale is breathtaking. The Friar tells a story condemning a corrupt summoner, yet he himself is a corrupt friar. The very vices he attacks—greed, extortion, manipulation, and pride—are the same vices that define his own character. Chaucer invites readers to see the Friar’s hypocrisy. The Friar is so blinded by his rivalry with the Summoner that he fails to recognize the beam in his own eye. This double-edged satire is a hallmark of Chaucer’s genius. The tale serves as a mirror to the teller, revealing his own moral blindness and his eagerness to condemn others for sins he himself commits.

Satire and Social Commentary: The Friar as a Mirror of the Church

The Friar in Canterbury Tales is more than just a colorful character; he is a vehicle for Chaucer’s broader social and religious criticism. The late Middle Ages saw widespread discontent with the Church, particularly with the

wealth and worldliness of the clergy. The Friar embodies the complaints of reformers like John Wycliffe, who argued that friars had abandoned their mission of poverty and preaching for lives of luxury and manipulation.

Chaucer's satire operates on multiple levels. On the surface, the Friar is a comic figure—a smooth talker who knows how to work a room. But beneath the humor lies a serious indictment. The Friar uses the language of religion to justify his greed: he "makes the person (parishioner) pay for the sacrament of marriage" and "absolves for a small gift." He commercializes the sacred. Chaucer does not need to preach a sermon; he simply shows the Friar in action, and the reader understands the rot.

This critique extends to the entire ecclesiastical system. The Friar's license, his connections, and his ability to operate outside of parish authority all point to systemic abuses. Chaucer, writing in a time of plague, war, and religious upheaval, used the Friar to ask a crucial question: What happens when those who claim to represent God serve only themselves?

Comparing the Friar to Other Religious Pilgrims

To fully appreciate The Friar in Canterbury Tales, it is helpful to compare him to other pilgrims who share his vocation. Chaucer provides a spectrum of religious figures, allowing readers to measure each against the ideal.

- The Friar vs. The Parson: This is the most stark contrast. The Parson is poor in wealth but rich in holiness. He visits the sick, gives to the poor, and practices what he preaches. The Friar is his polar opposite: wealthy, worldly, and self-serving. The Parson represents what the Friar should have been.
- The Friar vs. The Monk: The Monk is also worldly—he loves hunting, eating, and fine clothes. He is a critic of monastic rules, but he is relatively honest about his indulgences. The Friar, however, hides his worldliness behind a mask of piety. The Monk's corruption is more open; the Friar's is more insidious because it uses the language of holiness to deceive.
- The Friar vs. The Pardoner: The Pardoner is an open fraud; he admits he sells false relics and preaches for money. The Friar is more refined. He does not openly admit his corruption; he rationalizes it. If the Pardoner is a con man, the Friar is a white-collar criminal of the Church.

Through these comparisons, Chaucer shows that corruption takes many forms. The Friar is perhaps the most dangerous because he is the least obvious. He can sit at the table with the worthy and the wicked alike, and no one questions him until Chaucer lifts the veil.

Literary Techniques: How Chaucer Brings the Friar to Life

Chaucer's characterization of the Friar is a masterclass in literary technique. He uses a combination of direct description, indirect characterization through action, and dramatic irony.

Direct Description in the General Prologue

Chaucer's narrator (who is himself a pilgrim) presents the Friar in a tone of naive admiration. He says the Friar is "an esy man to yeve penaunce" (an easy man when it came to penance). The reader understands that this is a vice, not a virtue. This ironic distance between the narrator's voice and the reader's understanding is a key source of humor and criticism.

Indirect Characterization Through the Tale

The Friar's Tale reveals his mindset. He is fixated on corruption, money, and punishment. His story is about a summoner, but it could easily be about a friar. The fact that he tells a tale of damnation suggests his own anxiety about judgment, or perhaps his lack of self-awareness. Chaucer leaves it open—is the Friar a deliberate hypocrite, or is he so blinded by his own rhetoric that he cannot see himself?

Dramatic Irony and the Link with the Summoner

The quarrel between

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