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**A Schematic Study of Chaucer's Religious Characters in the Prologue to
The Canterbury Tales**



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Abstract

Religious characters in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* are some of the most intriguing fictional characters. The conflict between religious constraints and individual freedom in Medieval England marks one of the core issues in this paper. The paper analyses three religious characters, the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar in the Prologue, applying Schema Theory of Cognitive Stylistics. The study highlights these characters subverting the schema of their given roles, identified in the Prologue, through the application of the theory. The discussion relies on the account of double-edged irony and satire employed by the narrator in the description of these characters. Relativity of cognitive psychology with the characterization of Chaucer's Prologue is established through the textual evidences; a critical insight into the description of ecclesiastical characters results into a clear picture of sociohistorical knowledge of the Medieval times. The study posits how the contextual knowledge (schema) plays an important role in forming an impression of these characters and how this knowledge based on the schema and readers' perception unravel the dichotomy in the description of the ecclesiastical characters in the Prologue and the tales.

Keywords: Prologue, Cognitive Psychology, Schema Theory.

Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer has been celebrated as first English poet and debated for his frame stories for a long time. *The Canterbury Tales* is still enjoyed by many even after a four hundred years. However, there are numerous researches available on Chaucer, more insightful and fruitful researches were conducted on Chaucer's Prologue and the tales in the twentieth century, especially, in the later half. Critics have fiercely contested *The Prologue* and *The Canterbury Tales* debating Chaucer's use of literary conventions and his responsiveness to the listening audience (Bronson, 1940, p.176; Manly, 1966, p.361); others reading it as a portrait gallery working a relationship of Chaucer's work with earlier traditions. Lowes (1913) and Robertson (1962) analyse the work in the light of the technicalities of Medieval theology. In the 1970, two earlier concerns resurfaced: first, Chaucer's attitude towards social and economic issues; second, his irony and satire (Mann, 1973, p. 363). Mann's book on the General Prologue focuses on class system, occupational labels, and kinds of jobs and sources of income in the 14th century England. Marxist critics like Mann have argued about the Prologue as not simply realistic but a critique of realism. Murriel Bowden's *A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* (1964) also emphasizes Chaucer's indebtedness to his physical and cultural surrounding concerning the part environment played in his poetry. Apart from these individual efforts regarding understanding Chaucer's Prologue and the tales, a collection of works on critical heritage of Chaucer has been compiled by Peter Brown i.e., *A Companion to Chaucer* (2002) and by Harold Bloom i.e., *The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (1988).

However, there is an abundance of research studies on Chaucer's vast canvas of characters, marking researchers' deep interest in his General Prologue and *The Canterbury Tales*, there still remains a great scope of research on Chaucer's characters. One such area where Chaucer's work has been little explored is the

application of Cognitive Stylistics on his work. The application of the schema theory of cognitive psychology to characterization of literary text is an effective initiative in terms of development of psychological theories for real life people (Culpeper, 2000). According to Weinsheimer (1979) and Culler (1975) this notion contrasts to the notion of structuralists who believe that the existence of character lies in the premises of the text (Culpeper 2000, p. 291). The present study sheds light on the techniques of satire and irony from the perspective of cognitive psychology in the analysis of the ecclesiastical characters: the Prioress, the Monk, and the Friar. The analysis has been conducted within the framework of Schema Theory of Cognitive Psychology. The paper demonstrates how the satire and irony have been utilized, exploiting the Schemata of Medieval Christian theology and how, on the other hand, theology has been questioned by emphasising the fossilization of the stereotypes of religion. The irony and satire are, thus, shown to be complex and double-edged techniques used by Chaucer to achieve this end.

Theoretical Framework

Schema Theory is concerned with the structuring of knowledge in brain. The stored knowledge in brain, about a subject or event based on past experiences, guides the readers how to interpret new information (Pankin, 2013). Schema theory had been influential reading process (Anderson, 1977, 1978; Hacker, 1980; Pearson, 1982). However, the new perspectives about learning and learners (Baek, 1994) in recent research are centre of inquiry, the idea of prior knowledge is essential to all definitions of Schema (Culpeper, 2000). Jonathan Culpeper describes three sub-categories of “prior knowledge”: social categories, social schemata and cognitive stereotypes. We will focus here on “social categories”, specifically, what Culpeper (2000) calls “social role categories”. Social role categories include kinship, occupation and relational roles. In this group we can include the three characters of Chaucer’s General Prologue: The Prioress, the Monk and the Friar. Thus, we have to see their fictional roles in the light of their (religious) occupational and social roles, well-defined by Christian theology. It will be seen whether they uphold the callings of their social roles or put it in abeyance, inviting public criticism for their negligence.

Analysis

Studying fictional characters in literary works in the light of theories of cognitive psychology and social cognition is an interesting area of research today. Not only professional critics, but laymen too, depend on their real-world knowledge to explain characters in fictional works. Comprehension of characterization and the subsequent categorisation of characters is mostly based on the cognitive theories of social and cognitive psychology as Culpeper points out (2000, p. 291). Culpeper refers to several structuralist and semiotic critics (Chatman, 1972; Culler, 1975; Weinsheimer, 1979) who disputed the validity of applying psychological theories developed for understanding real-life people, arguing “that character has a purely textual existence” (Culpeper, 2000, p. 291).

Nevertheless, we have to establish the Schema against which these characters will be viewed. There were some stereotypical roles these clergymen had to play in the fourteenth century; the kind of tasteless ascetic life of monks, nuns and friars to which the monastic orders of the church had subjected them, is evident from the vows they had to take:

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The three counsels of perfection were the three vows of monasticism. A monk or nun vowed chastity, the complete abstention from sexuality; poverty, the complete abjuration of personal property; and obedience, the complete submission to a superior's will or to God's will, except, of course, for a counsel to sin. (Cosman, Jones, 2008, p. 337-339)

Further, Logan notes in his *A Runaway Religion in Medieval England, C. 1240-1540*: "The three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience gave context to a life lived in community... And for some, particularly the friars and those religious in hospitals?, there was the added desire to serve others" (1996, p. 75).

From the above two quotes, we can draw the following schemas for the Prioress, the Monk and the Friar:

Table 1 A prioress's Medieval schema would look like this:

Personal:	Habit:	Silent, punctual
	Goal:	Good deeds, religious service, Holy Communion, Lord's pleasure, learning Bible, love of the Lord
	Trait:	Obedient, chaste, poor, noble, charitable, unmarried, hardworking, pale complexion, not healthy, well-learned in theology
Social Role	Religious:	Head of a nunnery/priory, devotion, worship, promoting Christianity
Group Membership	Gender:	Female, Christian, Holy Order

Having drawn the schemas, the above mentioned three characters would have activated in Medieval England, both for the clergy and the laity, one can clearly see and analyse the kind of irony and satire of which these characters have been a target; and, more interestingly, the knowledge of the almost inhuman vows and laws of the church, invites a diligent reader to closely examine the deeper sense of irony and satire in a social context. The first sharp pricking of irony and satire is felt in the portrait of the Prioress, a nun, travelling along the rest of the pilgrims to the shrine of the "holy blissful martyr". The second line of her description defies the schema of a nun in the Middle Ages:

There also was a Nun, a Prioress,
Her way of smiling very simple and coy

...

And she was known as Madam Eglantine,
And well she sang a service, with a fine
Intoning through her nose, as was most seemly,
And she spoke daintily in French, extremely,
After the school of Stratford-atte-Bowe; (p.20)

As a medieval listener or reader, we would not probably be interested to know whether the nun was simple in her smiling or not. Her very name suggests a character who is more of a celebrity than a religious recluse, that is to say, she is a well-known public figure. Her way of singing the services is, again, eccentric. She spoke daintily

in French rather than Latin, the latter being the language of the church and the former the medium of the upper class, especially, courtly life, which her name, dress and manners suggest:

At meat her manners were well taught withal;

.....

She reached a hand sedately for the meat (p. 21).

The above quoted lines exclusively deal with her etiquettes, stateliness and courtliness of manners. From the details of carrying a morsel, not dipping “her fingers” in the “sauce”, the zest “for courtliness”, to wiping “upper lip so clean” so “that not a trace of grease was to be seen”, every word suggests her non-conformity to the schema drawn in Table 1. She doesn’t fulfil any of the vows she has solemnly taken: she is not poor, she can afford fine dress and “she had little dogs she would be feeding/ with roasted flesh, or milk, or the fine white bread”. The rest of the description focuses, similarly, on irrelevant details, putting her primary roles as a nun shadowed. The following lines depict her more as the paragon of beauty according to the medieval standards than an ideal Catholic nun. The prioress is not pale and poor that her stern vows require her to be since she was indeed by no means under grown. She has all kinds of fancy possessions and worldly desires which subverts the defined role for her character as a nun.

She has “a golden brooch”, gold being a forbidden possession and jewellery. More intriguing is her manifestation of worldly “amor”. However, the prologue’s Prioress carries no semblance to an ideal nun, as described by St. Benedict, and the typical schema we have described in Table 1. The narrator’s attention to her etiquettes, dress, looks, beauty, desires and love makes the Medieval ‘nun schema’ non-functional. On the contrary, putting all her religious adherences in dark, the narrator very subtly satirises the ‘Schemata of Christian Theology’ itself; the narrator shares a sense of the nonsensical boundaries drawn for a young woman, defying all human sense. The descriptive irony of the prioress’s portrait, thus, is double-edged portrayal. The issue of non-obedience has been wilfully complicated, complexity being one the primary design of the author in employing irony. Frank Stringfellow in his book *The Meaning of Irony: A Psychoanalytic Investigation* refers to the great quality of irony in Chaucer’s work.

Stringfellow catches this problem nicely when he writes, “there are . . . difficult cases, as in *The Canterbury Tales* for example, where we never know when the author is ironically feigning naïveté or when he is interposing between himself, us and as naïve, ironized narrator” (1994, p. 15).

Table 2 A monk would activate the following schema:

Personal:	Habit:	Silent, punctual, busy,
	Goal:	Good deeds, religious service, Holy Communion, Lord’s pleasure, propagating Christianity, learning Bible, love of the Lord
	Trait:	Obedient, chaste, poor, noble, charitable, unmarried,
Social Role	Religious:	hardworking, pale, not very healthy
		Head of a monastery, devotion, worship, promoting
Group Membership	Gender:	Christianity

The second character, the Monk, chosen in this paper for a schematic study, can be similarly approached. Moreover, the Monk is a more typical ascetic hermit than other ecclesiastic figures, as his very name and its etymology suggests. According to The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology (Skeat, 1993, p. 291), the word 'monk' comes from the Latin and Greek words 'monochus' meaning 'solitary' and 'monos' meaning 'alone'. The schema established for the Monk in Table 2 will guide us in our analysis of the portrait Chaucer has described in the General Prologue. The reader needs not wait for the satirical and ironic sneer of the narrator for too long, since the Monk's description begins in a similar sarcastic manner like that of the prioress. Right in the beginning the Monk flouts our knowledge of what a monk should have been in the medieval England and, thus, forms our schema in Table 2.

A Monk there was, one of the finest sort

A manly man, to be an Abbott able; (p.21)

Chaucer's monk is an extensive "rider"; he loves "hunting"; he is strongly built, that is, "a manly man" and he possesses "many a dainty horse" in his stable. His bridle's bells can be heard "louder than the chapel bell" where he is the keeper. Every word in this description undermines his vows of asceticism, poverty and religious service. There is nothing religious and holy in his demeanour. He, rather, openly breaks the counsels while he has had ordained as a monk:

The Rule of good St. Benet or St. Maur

As old and strict he tended to ignore; (p.22)

St. Benedict or St. Maurus' rules and counsels amount to not even "a plucked hen" for the Monk, because he finds their laws "strict" and "old". He ignores and decries such laws openly without any regard for his vows of "obedience". This particular monk is "uncloistered" and a "hunter", a forbidden business for a monk, with serious consequences; but he does not care for any such restrictions set by these saints. The narrator further complicates and ambiguates the ironic description by affirming the monk's behaviour.

The reader is confused by the complex narratology of the Prologue. The picture is seriously convoluted by the ambiguous irony of the language. On one hand, Monk has been satirized for not abiding by the laws of his profession, on the other hand, the stiffness of the rules followed by monks in Medieval Europe itself has been contested. Though, one may interpret it as a more serious jibe at the Monk who negates all ingredients of the schema of his ecclesiastic role.

Greyhounds he had, as swift as birds, to course.

Hunting a hare or riding at a fence

Was all his fun, he spared for no expense. (p.22)

These lines again portray the Monk as a man who disobeys the law of ownership and the vow of poverty set for him. His "hunting" and "riding" not only defy the law of "obedience" but it also reveals ~~the~~ him as a 'fun' loving man, who can go to any extent for the sake of his personal enjoyment. He has nothing "spiritual" in his character which is the core of the schema he should activate in the readers' minds. He not only can afford "fine grey fur" he can afford "gold" too.

He had a wrought-gold, cunningly fashioned pin;

Into a lover's knot it seemed to pass. (p.22)

"Gold" suggests his greed and the "pin" and the "lover's knot" suggest his worldly

love, unlike the “love of the Lord”, the latter being part of his Schema. One may further conjecture about his flouting of the “vow of chastity” too, since he believes in worldly love and “the lover’s knot”, showing himself prone to mundane relationships as opposed to his neglected divine bond. The monk, thus, fails to activate the Medieval Monk schema in any of its aspects. The schema, however, has been put to criticism for its strictness by the narrator in his complex irony and satire, and it may be suggested that the monk schema like all schemas and schemata needs to be updated with broader assimilations and modifications from the life of real monks, not as they are described by St. Benedict.

Table 3. A friar’s schema would be slightly different from the prioress and the monk’s schema as shown in the following table:

Personal:	Habit:	Punctual, busy, begging
	Goal:	Collecting alms and charity, good deeds, religious Service, Lord’s pleasure, propagating Christianity, Holy Communion, learning Bible, love of the Lord
	Trait:	Obedient, chaste, poor, noble, charitable, unmarried, hardworking, pale, not very healthy
Social Role	Mendicant:	Roaming about to collect alms and charity, devotion, worship, promoting Christianity, tending to the sick
Group Membership	Gender:	Male, Christian, Holy Order

Lastly, the character of the Friar is analysed here against the background of his typical schema, as shown in Table 3. He belongs to one of the four mendicant Orders, though not specified which one of the four groups. Very much like the previous two characters, he straight away invalidates our knowledge of a Medieval Christian Friar. Apart from being ‘wanton’, ‘merry’ and ‘festive’ he is:

So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned speech.

He’d fixed up many a marriage, giving each

Of his young women what he could afford her (p.23).

“Glib with gallant phrase” he can extort money from every person he comes across, as we shall see. He is certainly not a poor beggar, a man who “fixed up many a marriage” at his own cost. So, he flouts the vow of “poverty” in his schema.

This prior “was qualified to hear confessions” and uses his authority to blackmail people demanding for more money from every poor wretch after hearing their “confessions”. His greed and cunningness have been pointed out in many places in his portrait.

So far, the Friar has failed to align with the schema of his profession as shown in Table 3. He has not only broken his pledge of poverty, but has committed a greater sin of greed in exploiting “widows” and other people. He is much interested in females and his “tippet” is full of “pins and pocket-knives” to be given to “pretty girls” suggesting his, probable, violation of the “vow of chastity” while trying to create worldly bonds, having clearly been instructed to keep an eternal distance from the feminine world that could harm his religious intent. The Friar knows all the “taverns” and “barmaids” in the country, and knows them better than “lepers and, beggars”.

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Helping and serving the poor and the sick was part of his job, which he shuns, committing a violation of the undertaking of “obedience”. A sense of fossilization haunts, however, the schema of the Medieval Friar, for its callously devised laws and vows. The irony and satire, again, are driven to criticise the Friar’s disobedience and religion’s declarations.

Conclusion

After the above analysis of the three characters from Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, the Prioress, the Monk and the Friar, it may be concluded that the application of schema theory and cognitive psychology as a stylistic tool bring deeper understanding, variety and clarity into the analyses of fictional characters. The question as to why these characters are satirized and mocked, has been related to their sociohistorical background and the particular set of knowledge the narrator had access to, when he chose to satirize and criticize certain of the characters. The schema theory of these three characters, further, opens up new avenues of critical insight into the lives of the Medieval subjects, especially, the clergymen, and the hard and fast rules—fossilized and in need of a great assimilation and modification—they had to obey.

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