

Eureka Journal of Language, Culture & Social Change (EJLCSC)

ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



This article/work is licensed under CC by 4.0 Attribution

<https://eurekaopenaccess.com/index.php/3>

CHARACTERIZATION TECHNIQUES IN THE GENERAL PROLOGUE OF ‘THE CANTERBURY TALES’

Bekmirzayeva Dilrabo Olimjon qizi,
Independent Researcher of Samarkand State
Institute of Foreign Languages
diliandjony@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the major characterization techniques employed by Geoffrey Chaucer in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer presents a diverse group of pilgrims representing various social classes, professions, and moral attitudes of fourteenth-century English society. The article analyzes how Chaucer combines direct and indirect characterization, physical description, social and occupational identity, irony, satire, humor, and contrast to create vivid and realistic portraits of his characters. Special attention is given to the ironic narrative voice and the use of symbolic details, which expose human weaknesses and social hypocrisy, particularly among religious figures.

Keywords: General Prologue, characterization techniques, direct and indirect characterization, physical description, social class, occupational identity, medieval estates satire, irony, satire, humor, narrative voice, symbolic details, realism, moral criticism, religious hypocrisy social hierarchy.

Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* occupies a central place in Middle English literature, and the General Prologue serves as one of the most remarkable examples of character portrayal in medieval writing. In this introductory section,

Eureka Journal of Language, Culture & Social Change (EJLCSC)

ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



This article/work is licensed under CC by 4.0 Attribution

<https://eurekaopenaccess.com/index.php/3>

Chaucer presents a group of pilgrims from various social, professional, and moral backgrounds, creating a vivid panorama of fourteenth-century English society. Rather than relying on a single heroic figure, Chaucer constructs a collective portrait in which each character represents both an individual personality and a broader social type. [3:10] The success of the General Prologue lies largely in Chaucer's masterful use of characterization techniques, through which he combines realism, satire, humor, and irony to reveal human nature. Chaucer worked at several occupations, such as a page, courtier, diplomat and civil servant. For this reason he knew all social problems, unfair system of the government and corruption of church. Rather than presenting characters as fixed moral abstractions, Chaucer endows them with individualized traits, contradictions, and psychological depth. This approach represents a significant departure from earlier medieval literature, which often relied on symbolic figures embodying singular virtues or vices. Chaucer's characters, by contrast, reflect the complexity of real human behavior, blending moral ideals with personal weaknesses.

Social rank, occupation and language

One of Chaucer's primary techniques of characterization is the use of social rank and occupation. Each pilgrim is introduced according to their profession—Knight, Monk, Miller, Pardoner, Wife of Bath—which immediately situates the character within the medieval social hierarchy. However, Chaucer does not merely list occupations; he uses them as a standard against which each character's behavior and morality can be judged. For example, the Knight is portrayed as the ideal medieval warrior, embodying honor, humility, and courtesy, while several church figures fail to live up to the moral expectations of their positions. [1:5] In this way, Chaucer links character to social responsibility and subtly critiques social institutions. The main purpose of collecting all types of ranks was to show their struggle, mistakes, unfairness of the society for everyone. For example each pilgrim tells the story according to their occupation, character and level in society.

Eureka Journal of Language, Culture & Social Change (EJLCSC)

ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



This article/work is licensed under CC by 4.0 Attribution

<https://eurekaopenaccess.com/index.php/3>

Language is one of the most significant ways Chaucer's characters reveal their identities. Each pilgrim's speech patterns, vocabulary, and rhetorical style reflect education, profession, gender roles, and moral outlook. Chaucer does not describe these traits explicitly; instead, they emerge naturally through the characters' own voices.

Highly educated characters often use formal rhetoric, classical references, and controlled syntax, while less educated figures rely on colloquial expressions, repetition, and emotional intensity. This linguistic variation creates a vivid sense of social diversity and authenticity. [7:3]. Chaucer's mastery lies in making speech itself a form of portraiture. A striking example is the Wife of Bath, whose prologue is longer than many tales. Her speech is argumentative, repetitive, and emotionally charged. She frequently interrupts herself, cites personal experience as authority, and selectively interprets scripture. Without authorial comment, her language exposes her confidence, manipulative intelligence, and resistance to patriarchal norms. The reader understands her character not because Chaucer explains it, but because she speaks at length in her own defense.

Direct and indirect characterization

Chaucer skillfully combines direct and indirect characterization. At times, the narrator explicitly states a character's qualities, as when the Knight is described as "worthy" and "gentle." More often, however, Chaucer relies on indirect methods—allowing readers to infer character traits through physical appearance, clothing, habits, and behavior. For instance, the Monk's love of hunting, rich clothing, and fine food indirectly reveal his worldliness and disregard for monastic discipline [2:25]. This blending of direct and indirect techniques gives the characters depth and realism, making them appear lifelike rather than symbolic abstractions.

Physical appearance as a part of indirect characterization plays a crucial role in General Prologue. Clothing, facial features, and personal accessories often

Eureka Journal of Language, Culture & Social Change (EJLCSC)

ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



This article/work is licensed under CC by 4.0 Attribution

<https://eurekaopenaccess.com/index.php/3>

function symbolically, revealing inner qualities. The Wife of Bath's bold clothing and gap-toothed smile suggest her confidence, experience, and dominance, while the Pardoner's strange appearance and flamboyant manner hint at moral corruption and deception. Such details allow Chaucer to convey complex character traits economically, turning outward description into a reflection of inner nature. Another distinctive feature of Chaucer's characterization is his use of irony and satire. The narrator often adopts an apparently neutral or even admiring tone, while the details provided subtly undermine that praise. This ironic gap between what is said and what is shown exposes hypocrisy, especially among religious figures such as the Friar, Monk, and Pardoner [4:36]. Through satire, Chaucer criticizes moral corruption without overt condemnation, encouraging readers to recognize flaws on their own. This technique makes the social critique both effective and engaging. By using contrast in General Prologue Chaucer often places virtuous characters alongside corrupt ones to highlight moral differences. The Parson and the Plowman, for example, are portrayed as genuinely moral figures, standing in stark contrast to the corrupt church officials [6:3]. These contrasts reinforce the ethical dimension of the General Prologue and guide the reader toward moral reflection without explicit preaching. In the General Prologue, the narrator frequently uses mild praise, polite language, and respectful tone, even when describing morally questionable figures. For instance, corrupt church officials are introduced with courteous descriptions that seem positive on the surface. However, the narrator's praise often clashes with the facts he provides, creating dramatic irony. The reader perceives contradictions between the narrator's tone and the characters' behavior, which becomes a powerful tool of indirect characterization. This technique reflects Chaucer's understanding of medieval rhetorical strategy, where understatement and irony were preferred over direct accusation. By refusing to judge openly, Chaucer shifts responsibility to the reader, who must interpret meaning independently. As a result,

Eureka Journal of Language, Culture & Social Change (EJLCSC)

ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



This article/work is licensed under CC by 4.0 Attribution

<https://eurekaoa.com/index.php/3>

characterization becomes an interactive process rather than a fixed moral statement [5:40]

Conclusion

In conclusion, Geoffrey Chaucer's General Prologue demonstrates a remarkably sophisticated approach to characterization that combines artistic subtlety with sharp social insight. By skillfully integrating direct and indirect characterization, Chaucer constructs a vivid panorama of fourteenth-century English society, in which individuals are defined not only by their social roles but also by their moral contradictions and personal flaws. While direct characterization provides the reader with clear information about a pilgrim's profession or social position, it is the indirect techniques—such as physical description, symbolic detail, irony, and satire—that give Chaucer's characters psychological depth and enduring realism. This indirect mode of characterization engages the reader in active interpretation and encourages critical reflection on social and moral values. The contrast between religious ideals and actual conduct, especially in the portrayal of church figures, reveals Chaucer's deep concern with ethical authenticity rather than mere social status. Chaucer's characterization transcends simple medieval typology and moves toward individualized, lifelike portraits. His characters are neither purely virtuous nor entirely corrupt; instead, they embody the complexity of human nature. Through humor, irony, and symbolic detail, the General Prologue achieves a balance between entertainment and moral critique, making it a foundational text in the development of realistic characterization in English literature. Chaucer's innovative techniques continue to influence narrative art and remain relevant for modern literary analysis.

References

1. Benson, C. David. *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.

Eureka Journal of Language, Culture & Social Change (EJLCSC)

ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



This article/work is licensed under CC by 4.0 Attribution

<https://eurekaoa.com/index.php/3>

2. Brewer, Derek. An Introduction to Chaucer. London: Longman, 1990.
3. Cooper, Helen. Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
4. Donaldson, E. Talbot. Speaking of Chaucer. New York: W. W. Norton, 1970.
5. Mann, Jill. Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
6. Асланова Х. А. ЧТО СКРЫВАЕТСЯ ПОД ПСЕВДОНИМОМ ПОЭТА GADOIY? //Theoretical & Applied Science. – 2013. – №. 6. – С. 99-104.
7. MUKHIDDINOV, M., SULAYMONOV, I., KHASANOVA, M., ASLANOVA, K., & SHOMURODOVA, S. (2021). Ode genre and ideological-artistic features of erkin vahidov's odes. Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business & Government, 27(3).
8. Назирова, Х. (2019). Художественная интерпретация чайной церемонии в японской литературе (на примере романа Ясунари Кавабата «Тысячекрылый журавль»). Восточный факел, 4(4), 57-69.
9. Маматкулова, Х. А. (2022). Этномаданий Маъноларнинг Бадиий Матнда Ифодаси. Kresna Social Science and Humanities Research, 4, 30-33.
10. Sattorova, G. (2020). Features fantasy Kenzaburo Oe. Результаты научных исследований в условиях пандемии (COVID-19), 1(03), 57-60.
11. Abdusalomovna, X. M., & Abdug'Aniyevna, X. M. (2022). ADABIYOTDA VERJINIYA VULF QARASHLARI. Innovation: The journal of Social Sciences and Researches, 1(2).
12. Pardayeva I. M. et al. ENDLESS TRACES OF UZBEKISTAN CREATORS IN WORLD LITERATURE AND SCIENCE //INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH IN EDUCATION, TECHNOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT. – 2025. – Т. 4. – №. 5. – С. 186-198.

Eureka Journal of Language, Culture & Social Change (EJLCSC)

ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 3, March 2026



This article/work is licensed under CC by 4.0 Attribution

<https://eurekaoa.com/index.php/3>

13. <https://englishlitnotes.com/2025/05/23/characterization-in-prologue-to-the-canterbury-tales/>
14. https://lxnotes.com/chaucers-art-of-characterization-in-the-general-prologue-to-the-canterbury-tales?utm_source=chatgpt.com