

DEGREES OF ANALYTICAL MATURITY

DICTION, SENTENCE STYLE, ELABORATION, INSIGHTFULNESS, ECONOMY

PROLOGUE TO CHAUCER'S *CANTERBURY TALES*, THE FRIAR TRANSLATED FROM MIDDLE ENGLISH BY NEVILLE COGHILL

A FRIAR there was, a wanton one and merry,
A Limiter, a very festive fellow.
In all the Four Orders there was none so mellow,
So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned speech.
He'd fix up many a marriage, giving each
Of his young women what he could afford her.
He was a noble pillar of his Order.
Highly beloved and intimate was he
With country folk within his boundary,
And city dames of honour and possessions:
For he was qualified to hear confessions,
Or so he said, with more than priestly scope,
He had a special license from the Pope.
Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift,
With pleasant absolution, for a gift.
He was an easy man in penance giving,
Where he could hope to make a decent living;

It's a sure sign whenever gifts are given
To a poor Order that a man's well shriven
And should he give enough he knew in verity, 20
The penitent repented in sincerity.
5 For many a fellow is so hard of heart
He cannot weep, for all his inward smart.
Therefore instead of weeping and of prayer
One should give silver for a poor Friar's care. 25
He kept his tippet stuffed with pins for curls,
10 And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.
And certainly his voice was gay and sturdy,
At sing-songs he was champion of the hour.
His neck was whiter than a lily flower 30
But strong enough to butt a bruiser down.
15 He knew the taverns well in every town
And every innkeeper and barmaid too
Better than lepers, beggars and that crew.

For in so eminent a man as he
It was not fitting with the dignity
Of his position, dealing with a scum
Of wretched lepers; nothing good can come
Of commerce with such slum-and-gutter dwellers,
But only with the rich and victual-sellers. 40
But anywhere a profit might accrue
Courteous he was and lowly of service too.
Natural gifts like his were hard to match.
He was the finest beggar of his batch,
And, for his begging-district, payed a rent;
His brethren did no poaching where he went. 45
For though a widow mightn't have a shoe,
So pleasant was his holy how-d'ye-do
He got his farthing from her just the same
Before he left, and so his income came 50
To more than he laid out. And how he romped,

35 Just like a puppy! He was ever prompt
to arbitrate disputes on settling days
(For a small fee) in many helpful ways,
Not then appearing as your cloistered scholar 55
With threadbare habit hardly worth a dollar,
But much more like a Doctor or a Pope.
Of double-worsted was the semi-cope
Upon his shoulders, and the swelling fold
About him, like a bell about its mould 60
When it is casting, rounded out his dress.
He lisped a little out of wantonness
To make his English sweet upon his tongue.
When he had played his harp, or having sung,
His eyes would twinkle in his head as bright 65
As any star upon a frosty night.
50 This worth's name was Hubert, it appeared.

LEVEL 1

The description of the Friar contains much irony, a contrast between what is stated and what is meant. He really seems interested in material things.

LEVEL 2

The description of the Friar contains much irony, a contrast between what is stated and what is meant. He is a "champion" at parties. He deals with "city dames of honor and possessions." He believes that he is "better" than "lepers" and "beggars." He cons a "poor widow" into giving him money.

LEVEL 3

The description of the Friar contains much irony, a contrast between what is stated and what is meant. Being a cleric, a Friar is expected to be uninterested in the material things of this world so he can devote his life to serving God and his fellow man. This Friar, however, is a "champion" at parties. He deals with "city dames of honor and possessions." He believes that he "better" than "lepers" and "beggars." He even cons a "poor widow" into giving him money.

LEVEL 4

In describing the Friar, Chaucer uses irony to show how this Friar's life style is clearly inappropriate to a holy calling. Not only does he go to parties, but he is a "champion" at partying. While a proper Friar would not behave indiscreetly around women, this Friar is interested in "city dames," especially if they have "honor and possessions." Having little interest in the sick, he shows interest in the poor only so he can monetarily exploit them. He cons a "poor widow."

LEVEL 5

In describing the Friar, Chaucer uses irony to show how this Friar's life style is clearly inappropriate to his calling. While a proper Friar would not generally go to parties, not only does this one go but he is what we today would call the 'life of the party.' In fact, if there were a contest to see who would be the best at partying, this Friar would likely be the "champion." He apparently does not take celibacy seriously either since his association with "city dames" suggests a fondness for the company of prostitutes. If women happen to have "honor and possessions," we can speculate that he seeks their favor for both their respectability and their wealth. It is easy then to understand why this Friar has little or no interest in the sick or poor of his society, any interest being limited to "poor [widows]" whom he can monetarily exploit.

LEVEL 6

In describing the Friar, Chaucer uses irony to show how the Friar's life style is inappropriate to his calling. While a proper Friar would not generally go to parties, not only does this one go but he is what we today might call the 'life of the party.' He does not take celibacy seriously either since his association with "city dames" suggests a fondness for the company of prostitutes. If women happen to have "honor and possessions," he seeks their favor for both their respectability and their wealth. It is easy then to understand why this Friar has little or no interest in helping the sick or poor of his society, any interest being limited to "poor [widows]" whom he can monetarily exploit. Considering this lack of concern for his own public image, he apparently enjoys flaunting his lifestyle. We may admit to a grudging admiration for someone with no apparent moral ambivalence or fear of public opinion. In this sense, the real irony here is that such a Friar is even tolerated. The real object of Chaucer's criticism may be a society that can allow him not only to exist but to flourish and prosper.