

Context 2 Medieval Society

Chaucer's contemporaries lived through troubled and uncertain times. **Death** was the only certainty, but it could strike at any time. The plague, or "Black Death", was the single most feared disease which could strike anyone down within days, but this was not the only killer. Medieval society could fall ill and die as victims to many diseases which we see as easily curable these days; they were also heavily dependent upon the weather for the success of their crops – a bad harvest meant starvation and death; without the scientific enlightenment we know today, many children died within the first months of life, and women died giving birth; those who were strong enough to survive might find themselves at risk in the interminable wars with France (Chaucer's life spanned much of "The Hundred Years War") or the civil skirmishes which abounded at this time, notably the Peasants' Revolt against King Richard II.

This acceptance that death was always around the corner led to an unshakeable belief in the afterlife, and with it, a strengthening of power for the **Catholic Church**. In a society where the overwhelming majority (around 90%) were illiterate peasants, the only way in which they could make sense of a miserable and fearful existence was a simple trust in the belief that this life on earth was no more than a temporary test, and that the true reward would come after death and eternity in Paradise as promised by Christ. Fear of eternal damnation was far more powerful than fear of death.

With this simple trust came corruption. Church authorities could, if they so desired, make their faithful do anything they wanted, using this threat of excommunication and damnation. The church levied taxes, thus becoming enormously wealthy; they could control kings and queens because of the threat of what they could preach to the masses; they could command individuals to do their bidding, even for sexual gratification, all with the bizarre edict that it was the will of God. The illiterate peasants would not be able to contradict it because they were told that it was the scriptures which were making the commands, and going against the word of the priest was the equivalent of going against the word of God.

The social **status quo** was important, especially to the tiny minority who benefitted from it. It was generally believed that you could not change from the class that you were born into. For the majority, that meant a life of poverty and abuse (peasantry). The other two classes were the nobility (wealth and influence passed on from father to son) and the church (many a career was characterised by wealth and power). The middle class (notably merchants) was only just beginning to emerge and had not, by now, achieved significant national power.

Finally, a word needs to be said about the place of **women** in this society (see also the article on Alison page 47). Women were seen as inferior to men, and indeed, when they married, they became the possessions of their husbands. They were little more than a useful commodity for childbearing or satisfying lust. Horrifying as it might seem these days, a woman's useful life started at puberty. As soon as she became able to bear children, she would become viable for marriage. So, marriage at eleven or twelve was accepted because of the need to make the greatest use of a woman's childbearing capability before early death. In this male-dominated society, it became accepted that women were evil – after all, they were "Daughters of Eve", who was responsible for the fall from Grace of mankind in the Garden of Eden. Men could therefore justify their abuse of women by calling it some sort of punishment for what Eve had done. Chaucer was centuries before his time in seeing this as degrading and abusive, but he was also able to perceive the genius and subtlety of the female mind in making the best of their station in life, while still allowing the men to think they were in control.

The Miller and his Tale 1

Chaucer describes the miller in “The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales” as he does all the pilgrims.

From The General Prologue (Lines 547-568)

The Miller was a stout carl for the nones,
Ful big he was of brawn, and eke of bones;
That proved wel, for ov'r all ther he came,
At wrestling he would bear alway the ram.
He was short-sholdred, broad, a thicke knarr.
There was no door, that he nold heave of harre
Or breke it at a renning with his heed.
His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,
And thereto brood, as though it were a spade.
Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
A werte, and theron stood a tuft of heris

Reed as the bristles of a sowis eris.
His nosehirles blake were and wide.
A sword and bokeler bare he by his side.
His mouth as greet was as a forneys.
He was a jangler, and a goliardeys,
And that was mooste of sinne and harlotries.
Well koude he stelen corn, and tollen thries;
And yet he hadde a thomb of gold, pardie.
A whit coat and a blue hood wered he
A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and sowne,
And therewithal he brought us out of towne.

Modern English

In the first place, the miller was a stout chap: he was well muscled and heavy boned. That was useful because he beat everyone at wrestling, always winning the prize ram. He had stocky shoulders, was a broad and knotty man. There was no door made that he couldn't heave off its hinges or break down by running at it with his head! His beard was as red as any sow or fox and also broad, the width of a spade. Upon the very tip of his nose he had a wart upon which grew a tuft of bristles, as red as the bristles on a pig's ears; his nostrils were black and wide. He carried a sword and shield by his side. His mouth was the size of a great furnace and he was a loudmouth and a teller of dirty stories, mostly about sin and smut. He was good at stealing corn, charging triple the going rate – to be honest, he had a “thumb of gold”. He wore a white coat and a blue hood, and the noises he could produce out of a bagpipe! That was how he “serenaded” us out of town!

Assignment 1

What do you perceive about the miller from Chaucer's description?

In your planning:

- Take note of the key word “perceive” as well as the word “description”.
- When dealing with the description, look at how Chaucer uses the senses (all of them in one way or another).
- What does Chaucer imply in the imagery he chooses?
- Always quote in the original poetry, never in “translation”.

The Miller and his Tale 1 (NOTES)

These notes contain information about the section in general, as well as notes which will assist in answering Assignment 1

Chaucer shows his ability to capture, not only description, but also an understanding of the personality of the miller in a very compressed character portrait. The use of sensual imagery is intended to bring us close to the miller, encouraging us, not only to see his physical details, but also to smell and touch them!

The visual references are obvious, with the use of size, colour and parts of the body. However, less obvious, but equally important in building up the composite picture are the more subtle references to other senses. We are invited to listen to the “sowne” he produces out of his bagpipes; even though we are not told in so many words, we are led to assume that it isn’t a pretty sound! We are also given clues to his rough texture, with the rather disconcerting references to the bristles on the end of his wart, and perhaps, even more disconcertingly, Chaucer forces us, in his description, too close for comfort, where we can almost feel and smell the “forneyse” heat from his “nosethirles”!

In terms of character, we are given a clear indication that he is not merely a big man, but something of a brute. We have to answer tantalising questions like WHY does he charge at locked doors with his head? WHY does he involve himself in arm-wrestling, and is it exclusively his skill that means he always wins, or do his opponents let him for fear of the consequences? What use does he make of the “sword and bokeler” at his side? Do people KNOW that he is stealing their corn, but are afraid to challenge him? All in all, he appears to be an aggressive thug who tends to get his own way, for whatever reason. He is dominant enough to lead the rest of the pilgrims at the start of their journey, blowing his bagpipe, whether they want him to or not!

Chaucer’s imagery is also quite telling, as much of it involves animals. Pigs are mentioned more than once, which seems appropriate considering the associated insult that still applies when people are seen as “pigs”. However, the fox reference gives him a different perspective. Is there more to the miller than meets the eye? Could it be that much of his dominance and cheating are the result of cunning. Certainly, when he speaks to the reeve prior to starting his tale, he seems to display a wit and sense of irony that belie the instinctive first impression.

All in all, Chaucer has presented us with someone who is unremittingly immoral, in virtually all senses, and yet, he has made the miller strangely attractive to us; it is difficult to be too afraid of a character who had his wart and nostrils described in detail! From a safe distance, we, like Chaucer, can stand back in the hope of being amused by his somewhat bizarre behaviour, and the knowledge that he is an expert in dirty jokes raises a degree of anticipation of how far he will go when he starts his tale.

In The Examination Room

This section is specifically aimed at students following the AQA A/S Syllabus 5741.

The Assessment Objectives (AO's)

Although it is important to address all of the AO's, in this particular text, AO's 4 and 5 are given slightly higher weighting in the marking than AO's 1,2 and 3.

- AO1 Deals with communication – spelling, phrasing, punctuation, structure and so on.
- AO2 Deals with knowledge and understanding of the text itself.
- AO3 Deals with appreciation of the style of the text.
- AO4 Deals with the ability to see different interpretations of the meaning of the text.
- AO5 Deals with the context of the text

1. What you can expect from the examiner.
2. What the examiner can expect from you.
3. Advice on what you can do to be prepared for the examination.

Choice

1. **You can expect the examiner** to give you a CHOICE between 2 questions on “The Miller’s Tale”.
2. **The examiner will expect you** to spend an hour answering ONE of them.
3. This is an “open book” examination, so you will have your copy of the text to help you, but BEWARE! An hour is not a long time, and you should go into the examination knowing the text so well that you are not spending a disproportionate amount of time thumbing through the text for information.

Question Style

1. **You can expect the examiner** to ask you a general question on an aspect of the tale in general OR a more focused question on a specific extract from the tale, or a combination of both.
2. **The examiners will expect you** to understand the requirements of the question and any technical language they use in the question.
3. Clearly, the better your knowledge of the text, the better prepared you will be for anything the examiner asks. You will have done work on character, themes, style and context of “The Miller’s Tale” during your year’s study, but there is no guarantee that an exact copy of a question you have done during the course, will come up in the examination. The question itself will have some key words which you should keep in mind when answering. An examiner will consider expressions like “Courtly Love” part of the study of the tale as a whole, and therefore valid to use in a question without including a definition.