

## The Qualities Shared by The Canterbury Tales and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

by Joshua M

In every culture where literature has developed, writers have existed who contributed tremendously to its progression or quality. Writing has taken different paths around the world, but often its path hinged on the works of one or two authors who set the bar and stepped out of the style that preceded them. Two such writers were Geoffrey Chaucer and Mark Twain. The greatest works of both men accentuated the writing of their nations: Chaucer set English literature into motion with The Canterbury Tales and Twain tremendously individualized American writing with The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. The two works had nearly nothing in common as far as style was concerned, but at the same time they possessed other similarities that let us see the qualities that shape literature. The commonalities that The Canterbury Tales and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn shared were characters who provided a cross-section of society, language that was untraditional, and satire that exposed bad elements in society.

Both Chaucer and Twain exposed their readers to characters from all parts of society, but they did so in very different ways. As an episodic novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn introduced new characters in every episode, allowing readers to get a glimpse of their lifestyle. Probably the most developed snapshots Twain provided were into the lives of slaves through Jim and into the ways of conartists through the prince and the duke. His wide sample of society also included warmongers, merciful young women, elderly people, abusive [written at e alamance hs in 04] fathers, rich people, drunks, homeless people, and rioters. The pilgrimage Chaucer painted was different from

Twain's river tale because it gave a cross-section of English society at the very beginning of the tale instead of as it progressed. Even so his method was very effective, as Legouis relates, "[Chaucer] made his group of pilgrims into a picture of the society of his time of which the like is not to be found elsewhere" (87). In his general prologue Chaucer introduced several examples of every part of the English society he knew; fighting men were there, as were liberal professions, land laborers, traders, craftsmen, victuallers, secular clergymen, and members of monastic orders (Legouis 87). Chaucer's society study did not end with the prologue but continued into the rest of the work because the pilgrims' dialogue and tales characterized them further.

Probably the most courageous thing that both Chaucer and Twain did with their masterpieces was use untraditional language. In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Twain went to great pains to learn the dialects included in his novel so that his book's narration and dialogue [written at a glance] could be written in the vernacular. Instead of modeling his writing after the English or earlier American authors, Twain built his masterpiece with passages of American dialect such as, "'Den I gin 'm ten cents apiece, en dey 'uz mighty well satisfied, en wisht some mo' raf's 'ud come along en make 'm rich ag'in'" (Twain 112). Similarly, Chaucer decided not to write his masterpiece in French and "we [saw] the first result of the Norman yeast upon the home-baked Saxon loaf" (Lowell 61). In Chaucer's England, French had been the language of literature and the upper class ever since the Normans had subdued the Anglo-Saxons. Despite his knowledge of French, Chaucer elected to write The Canterbury Tales in what we now call Middle English, a mixture of French and Old-English. His decision to do so

recognized English as a language worthy of literature and made his tale available to people not in the upper class.

The literature of Chaucer and Twain is further worthy of recognition for its compelling mastery of satire. Both writers manipulated satire to point out the flaws of their societies, and both of them definitely had flaws to point out. Twain used the Shepardson's family feud to satirize against pointless war, he criticized the South's cowardly dealings with his easily swayed lynch mob, and he satirized laziness with the men idly asking for chews of tobacco. In The Canterbury Tales Chaucer included a great amount of satire because [written at e alamanca hs in 04] he enjoyed poking fun at things, but in many cases his proddings struck home to important issues. According to Lowell, "the satire of [Chaucer] is genial with the broad sunshine of humor, into which the victims walk forth with a delightful unconcern, laying aside the disguises of themselves... till they have made a thorough betrayal of themselves so unconsciously that we almost pity while we laugh" (62). Chaucer satirized long-winded people with his aging knight, the educated with his illiterate manciple who cheated the literate, people who marry for love with the wife of Bath, and boasters with the debtor Merchant who told of his profits. The largest societal problem that Chaucer pointed out was a tremendous one: corruption in the Catholic Church. Chaucer prodded the church by making every clerical character in his tale hypocritical, greedy, and corrupt. The only exception was the parson, who epitomized everything a clergyman needed to be. The following description of the Summoner serves as a good example of how Chaucer satirized the church: "Why, he'd allow – just for a quart of wine – / Any good lad to keep a concubine / A twelvemonth and dispense him altogether!" (Chaucer 37).

Anyone who has read the masterpieces of Chaucer and Twain knows that the story of Jim and Huck floating down the Mississippi in a raft and that of 30 pilgrims going to Canterbury had nothing in common in the way of style, diction, or plot. However, the reason that Chaucer and Twain created major works of literature was because of what their words did instead of how they read. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Canterbury Tales were the same in how they showed a broad spectrum of their [written at e alamanca hs in 04] societies with their characters, broke from the language that was customary for writing at the time, and used satire to bring to light problems they saw around them. By including these qualities Chaucer legitimized his language and laid the groundwork for English poetry, and with the same tools Twain individualized American literature more than any of his predecessors.

## WORKS CITED

- Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Canterbury Tales. Trans. Nevill Coghill. Harrisonburg: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Legouis, Emile. "Chaucer." Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800. Ed. James E. Person, Jr.. 28 Vols. to date. Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992. 17: 85-89.
- Lowell, James Russell. "Chaucer" Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800. Ed. James E. Person, Jr. 28 Vols. to date. Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992. 17: 61-62.
- Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. New York: Modern Library Edition. 112.