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# Towards the Typology of Character Portraits in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

## Abstract

The verbal portrait, viewed as the textual depiction of a fictional character, represents one of the most complex yet relatively underexplored aspects of literary art from a linguistic perspective.

This paper investigates the role of verbal portraiture in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, with particular emphasis on the general prologue. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative framework that integrates typological, stylistic, semantic, and literary approaches. Three influential models—Gabel's minimalist versus extended portraits (1964), Bazilova and Suleimanova's concentrated versus deconcentrated portraits (2012), and Bespalov's sketchy, evaluative, situational, and descriptive portraits (2001)—are analysed in comparison. The analysis uses linguo-stylistics and semantics to trace how lexical and structural choices shape meaning, while framing theory and narratology clarify how cognitive and cultural stereotypes influence interpretation. Seven representative figures—the Prioress, the Clerk, the Merchant, the Friar, the Parson, the Miller, and the Wife of Bath—are examined in depth.

The findings demonstrate that Chaucer's portraits are rarely confined to a single type but instead exhibit hybrid, layered strategies that combine evaluative, symbolic, and situational functions. This hybridity illustrates how verbal portraiture in the General Prologue individualises characters, critiques medieval society, and enhances the text's realism and satirical effect.

**Keywords:** *verbal portrait, medieval literature, Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, portrait typology*

## 1. Introduction

A fictional character's verbal portrait is one of the essential components of a literary work. It fulfils multiple functions within the text. A character's physical characteristics may hint at their personality, background, or role in the narrative. It may also reveal the author's attitude and worldview and better engage and immerse the reader by creating a vivid mental image (Heier, 1976).

There are many reasons for grouping physical features, primarily to provide structure, clarity, and precision in description. Physical features are usually grouped into several categories. Depending on the writer's goal and literary movement, various combinations of these categories exist.

The analysis of the verbal portrait from a diachronic perspective has shown that the description of a character's appearance does not adhere to a single, fixed principle. The amount and organisation of conveyed information vary across literary movements, as does the sequence of descriptive elements within the text.

This paper discusses different classifications of character portraits and examines them using samples from Geoffrey Chaucer's collection of stories *The Canterbury Tales*. It will demonstrate how Chaucer combines personal traits with common social archetypes, creating vivid and dynamic characters.

This paper aims to:

- Explore the functions of a fictional character's verbal portrait.
- Review and compare existing classifications (typologies) of character descriptions.
- Analyse character portraits in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.
- Demonstrate how Chaucer creates vivid and dynamic characters that correspond to various typologies.
- Reveal underlying cognitive structures (frames) associated with the portrait types under analysis.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design at the intersection of linguistics and literary studies. The methodology combines close reading with typological, stylistic, semantic, and literary approaches. The analysis proceeds by applying three major typological frameworks of character portraits: Gabel's minimalist and extended classification (1964), Bazilova and Suleimanova's distinction between concentrated and deconcentrated portraits (2012), and Bespalov's typology of sketchy, evaluative, situational, and descriptive portraits (2001). These models are not treated in isolation but compared and integrated to reveal the complexity of Chaucer's verbal portraits. Linguo-stylistics provides the foundation for analysing the expressive function of description (Wales, 2011; Leech & Short, 2007; Toolan, 1990; Verdonk, 2002; Widdowson, 1992; Galperin, 1977; Turner, 1973), while semantics (Leech, 1983; Cruse, 2000; Geeraerts, 2010) is used to trace how particular lexical choices construct meaning. Discourse analysis (Cook, 2007; Brown & Yule, 1983) offers tools for examining narrative organisation and the distribution of descriptive detail. Literary studies and framing theory (Stockwell, 2002; Minsky, cited in Brown & Yule, 1983) help explain how readers activate cultural stereotypes and cognitive structures when interpreting portraits. Narratological perspectives (Fludernik, 2009) and broader literary approaches (Guerin, 1998; Childs & Fowler, 2006; Heier, 1976) situate the analysis within traditions of characterisation. In addition, contextual studies on physiognomy, irony, and medieval culture (Dempster, 1932; Pace, 1962; Horobin, 2003; Horobin & Smith, 2002; Taubert et al., 2011; Srivastava, 2021; Ward, 2006; Matoušková, 2020; Alanazi, 2023) are drawn upon to deepen interpretation.

The empirical material for this research consists of verbal portraits from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as presented in the Penguin Popular Classics edition (1996). The focus is placed on the General Prologue, since it contains the fullest and most systematic character descriptions. Seven figures have been selected for detailed analysis: the Prioress, the Clerk, the Merchant, the Friar, the Parson, the Miller, and the Wife of Bath. These characters were chosen because they represent a broad spectrum of medieval society - religious, academic, mercantile, rural, and female roles - and illustrate different portraiture types identified in the theoretical models. Each passage is analysed with attention to its linguistic features, descriptive order, and symbolic functions. The study aims to demonstrate how Chaucer's portraits embody textual artistry and broader cultural meanings by combining typological frameworks with stylistic, semantic, and discourse analysis.

### 3. Different Classifications of Character Portraits

The theoretical classifications of character portraits suggested in the scholarly literature are based on different principles.

In his work (Gabel, 1964), Gabel distinguishes two types of verbal portraits based on the number of descriptive elements: **the minimalist** and **the extended portrait**.

According to this theory, from the Renaissance to the mid-19th century, the extended portrait, characterised by a detailed description of a character's appearance, was prominent. Characters were depicted in a way that mimics real life. Therefore, the conventional order of physical description was often followed—moving “from top to bottom”—to align with a natural perception of a human being. When perceiving a new individual, people typically form a general impression and then focus on more specific details, including facial features, complexion, body type, and attire (Taubert et al., 2011).

Through observation, it became clear that although medieval literature and later literary periods employ extended portraits, the details serve quite different purposes. For example, in *The Canterbury Tales*, face and skin (blemishes and scars) symbolise inner virtues or vices, while clothing directly indicates class and values (Horobin & Smith, 2002). Meanwhile, in realism, scars and wrinkles are associated with real-life struggles, and clothing reflects either economic status or changing emotional states. Chaucer frequently uses this technique in his descriptions, adorning some of his characters with various physical features that serve specific purposes and emphasise their materialism. A notable example of such a mimetic portrait is Madam Eglantine, the Prioress.

The Prioress plays a leading role in the church and oversees a small Catholic convent. Chaucer provides a detailed depiction of his character, including her facial features, physique, and attire. She has a delicate, graceful appearance. Her nose is well-shaped, and her light blue eyes and soft red lips enhance her charm. Her fingers are slender and elegant, and her broad, pale forehead lends her a dignified look.

*Her nose was fine; her eyes were blue as glass;  
Her mouth was small and therewith soft and red;  
But certainly she had a fair forehead;  
It was almost a full span broad, I own,  
For, truth to tell, she was not undergrown.* (Chaucer, 1996, p.5)

The Prioress is tall and dressed in a delicate gown that suits her perfectly. On her wrist, instead of a simple black rosary, one can see a coral bracelet, and around her neck — a golden brooch with the following inscription: "Amor Vincit Omnia"—"Love Conquers All." This inscription is rather worldly than religious. This overall description exposes the Prioress: Madame Eglantine is trying to look religious, however, her appearance and choice of clothing bring to life her true nature.

*Neat was her cloak, as I was well aware.  
Of coral small about her arm she'd bear  
A string of beads and gauded all with green;  
And therefrom hung a brooch of golden sheen  
Whereon there was first written a crowned "A,"  
And under, Amor vincit omnia.* (Chaucer, 1996, p.5)

Chaucer employs contrasts multiple times in his verbal portrait of the Prioress. Her height and broad forehead contrast her small, delicate nose and mouth, and make her appearance somewhat out of proportion. She wants to appear graceful and elegant, but her broad forehead subtly reveals her true self. Further supporting this idea, Chaucer adorns her character with thin, arched eyebrows that ultimately clash with her other more massive features. (Matoušková, 2020)

The minimalist portrait is a brief, concise and simple character description. Both Chaucer and modernist writers use this technique. However, the purpose and function vary from author to author. Chaucer emphasises the morality of characters without going deep into their psychology. On the contrary, modernists focus on psychological depth. These details are solely individual and help reveal the character's inner struggles.

Chaucer employs the minimalist portrait mainly to portray more or less dignified characters. A good example of this is the Clerk. He is the classic image of a poor scholar—spending every coin on books rather than food or clothing. His horse, just like him, is thin and pale, with a somber look. His clothes are worn and shabby, but none of that matters to him since his only true passion is learning.

*Nor he himself too fat, I'll undertake,*

*But he looked hollow and went soberly.*

*Right threadbare was his overcoat; for he.* (Chaucer, 1996, p.9)

As this passage suggests, we are dealing with a minimalist portrait. The reader cannot create a mental image of the student, nor is it necessary; unlike other characters, he places no value on food, drinks, or clothing.

Another classification proposed by Bazilova and Suleimanova (Bazilova & Suleimanova, 2012) is based on the distribution of the portrait within the text. They distinguish between **concentrated** and **deconcentrated** portraits.

A concentrated portrait captures a character's appearance within a single, specific passage of the text. The purpose of such a technique is to provide a reader with a complete and immediate understanding of a character, often without further elaboration. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Merchant's description appears at the very beginning of the passage, detailing his facial features and clothing. After this initial portrayal, the author does not return to it anymore.

One of the Merchant's distinguishing features is a forked beard. At first glance, this might seem like a personal choice of style, however, the split beard hints at his two-faceted nature.

His clothing also plays an important role. From the passage, we learn that he is wearing a motley cloak—a brightly coloured outfit. These vivid colours symbolise both his wealth and his ability to adapt, thus resembling a chameleon. (Srivastava, 2021)

Chaucer's Merchant follows the fashion which can be assumed from his hat type. A Flemish beaver hat, which was highly fashionable then, was soft and flexible, allowing it to take different shapes. This detail reinforces the idea that the Merchant knows how to fit in wherever he goes.

*There was a merchant with forked beard, and girt*

*In motley gown, and high on horse he sat,*

*Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat;*

*His boots were fastened rather elegantly.* (Chaucer, 1996, p.8)

His boots are elegantly crafted which is another clear sign of his financial success.

In contrast, a **deconcentrated portrait** disperses the character's description throughout the text, allowing the reader to become acquainted with their appearance gradually. This technique mimics real-life perception since no one can remain inalterable over time.

For Chaucer, a deconstructed portrait serves several purposes, specifically to add realism to his narrative; engage the reader in constructing the character's appearance and allow for irony and satire. For instance, the Friar, another pleasure-seeking and carefree clergyman, whose duty is to care for the poor, something he never actually does. The details of the Friar's appearance are scattered throughout the text.

The author begins by describing the Friar's physical appearance, notably comparing his white neck to a lily of May. However, this comparison is not merely meant to highlight the whiteness of his skin. The Lily of May traditionally symbolises purity and love—the qualities that hardly define the Friar. This suggests Chaucer's sarcastic tone in the portrayal. (Dempster, 1932)

*His throat was white as lily of the May;* (Chaucer, 1996, p.7)

Chaucer then focuses on the Friar's love for spending time in taverns. Only after that do we learn about his rounded physique and lavish clothing, which resemble the attire of a pope or a nobleman rather than that of a humble clergyman.

*But he was like a lord or like a pope.*

*Of double worsted was his semi-cope,*

*That rounded like a bell, as you may guess.* (Chaucer, 1996, p.8)

Chaucer tells us about the Friar's smooth-talking nature, thus emphasising his habit of flattering and gossiping. Finally, at the end of the passage, we become aware of his twinkling eyes. This final image further intensifies the irony of comparing him to the Lily of May—purity is contrasted with his deceptive nature, while love is replaced by lust and indulgence.

*His two eyes twinkled in his head as bright*

*As do the stars within the frosty night.* (Chaucer, 1996, p.8)

One more classification of the verbal portrait is put forward by Bepalov (Bepalov, 2006). The author identifies four types of verbal portraits:

1. Sketchy portrait
2. Evaluative portrait
3. Situational portrait
4. Descriptive portrait

**The sketchy portrait** briefly depicts a character's key traits with one or two distinctive features. To some extent, it aligns with the minimalist portrait described by Gabel. While Gabel calls this type of character description a "minimalist portrait", emphasising its conciseness, simplicity, and selective details, Bepalov prefers to term it a "sketchy portrait". Essentially, both styles aim to create a quick and purposeful image in the reader's mind—a character depicted with a few carefully chosen details, helping the author avoid overloading the text with lengthy descriptions. However, research indicates a slight distinction: in a sketchy portrait, the details given to a character tend to take on symbolic significance.

According to Bepalov, this type of description is mainly used for secondary or episodic characters. This is somewhat true for medieval literature. For instance, there is almost no physical description of the Plowman, an honest, hardworking, pious man who does not even have a tale assigned to him. We only know one detail about his clothing.

*In a tabard he rode upon a mare.* (Chaucer, 1996, p.15)

From this line, it becomes obvious that the Plowman wore a tabard (a simple workman's smock) and rode a mare (a female horse). The tabard was a loose-fitting, sleeveless outer garment, commonly worn by laborers, emphasizing his humble and hardworking nature.

**The evaluative portrait** reflects the author's explicit attitude toward a character. This type frequently appears in literary works of various movements. However, a purely evaluative portrait does not exist in its absolute form: each of the portrait types discussed in the paper contains implicitly or explicitly expressed evaluative elements. In reality, portrait types often blend together, reflecting the complexity of character representation in literature. Thus, it is not always possible to draw sharp distinctions between them.

Chaucer is particularly famous for his evaluative portraits, as each description reflects his attitude toward the characters. This is evident in his choice of words, use of contrasts, and subtle irony. The greater

the number of physical features is, the more negative the author's disposition toward the character becomes. Let's compare the Parson and the Miller.

The priest embodies Christian virtues; he is flawless and one of the few characters whom Chaucer presents in a purely positive light. The only physical detail we know about him is his thin physique.

*He was a learned man also, a clerk,* (Chaucer, 1996, p.14)

Chaucer does not describe his clothing, but given that he donates even his small income to those in need, it is reasonable to assume that his attire is modest, neat, yet worn over time.

This character is not preoccupied with material wealth, and consequently, the author did not find it necessary to provide a detailed verbal portrait of him. He prefers to concentrate on his good deeds.

The Miller, on the other hand, is described in detail. He is burly and large-boned, of broad, muscular build. He has a red beard which is compared to a fox's fur, somehow indicating his deceitful and cunning nature. The Miller has a very distinguishing feature, a hairy wart on his nose, along with large nostrils and an enormous mouth which is compared to a furnace, suggesting that his speech serves to mask both his physical and moral coarseness (Horobin, 2003).

*He was a chunky fellow, broad of build;  
He'd heave a door from hinges if he willed,  
Or break it through, by running, with his head.  
His beard, as any sow or fox, was red,  
And broad it was as if it were a spade.  
Upon the coping of his nose he had*

*A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs* (Chaucer, 1996, p.16).

As for his attire, Chaucer dresses him in a hooded cloak in white and blue, a striking contrast to his rough exterior. A hooded cloak also carries a deep symbolic meaning. The hood hides the face, creating an illusion of secrecy or deception. Thus, with his clothing, the Miller is trying to conceal his lust for pleasure.

*A white coat and blue hood he wore, this lad* (Chaucer, 1996, p.16).

The character's verbal portrait evokes a strongly negative impression. It highlights his inner corruption, reinforcing the idea that his outward appearance reflects his flawed nature. In the Prologue, almost the entire passage is dedicated to him focusing on his physical traits and emphasising his crude and untrustworthy personality.

**The situational portrait** refers to the depiction of a character within a specific situation, where their actions, emotions, and surrounding environment collectively shape their overall image.

Since the character portraits are only presented in the General Prologue, each described in just a few lines, and we do not see characters undergoing dynamic development.

**The descriptive portrait** offers a detailed account of a character's appearance. This style of characterisation was widespread among early writers, whose primary aim was to depict their characters vividly. A descriptive portrait often coincides with an extended type, providing a thorough view of the character's physical features, personality, and sometimes even their background or social status. The portrait of the Wife of Bath exemplifies a descriptive portrait.

The Wife of Bath is an exceptionally cheerful and bon vivant woman. Her clothing is of outstanding quality. She wears red stockings, which at that time were seen as a symbol of passion and temptation (Ward, 2006). Her shoes are soft and stylish, and her pale face is highlighted by rosy cheeks and lips.

*Her hose were of the choicest scarlet red,  
Close gartered, and her shoes were soft and new.  
Bold was her face, and fair, and red of hue* (Chaucer, 1996, p.13).

Chaucer continues his narrative by describing her attire, mentioning her large hat, well-fitted clothing (which also emphasises her full figure).

*Well wimpled, aye, and over all a hat*

*As broad as is a buckler or a targe;*

*A rug was tucked around her buttocks large* (Chaucer, 1996, p.14).

Although the details of the Wife of Bath's appearance and attire are scattered throughout the narrative without a strict structural order, the reader can still vividly imagine her character to the fullest. Although she leads an unconventional lifestyle, the reader does not despise her. This is because she does not pretend to be something she is not.

#### 4. The Frame Structure of Character Portraits in *The Canterbury Tales*

As Minsky suggests, our knowledge is stored in memory in the form of data structures (frames), which represent stereotyped situations. 'This is a remembered framework to be adapted to fit reality by changing details as necessary' (Brown&Yule 1983, 238). The paper argues that each portrait type is associated with a particular stereotyped situation reflected in an underlying cognitive structure (or a frame) stored in memory. Consequently, one of the aims of the study was to reveal the frames linked to the portrait types under analysis and show how they are realised in *The Canterbury Tales*. The table below displays: (a) general tendencies in the physical descriptions of Chaucer's characters; (b) symbolic readings of the appearance features and their link to deeper moral and social traits; (c) the narrative technique and descriptive sequence used in the portrait types under analysis.

| Character | Physical Traits                                                                | Symbolic Meaning                                        | Description Type                       | Order of Description                        |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Knight    | Modest dress, stained tunic                                                    | Humility, honour, devotion, nobility                    | Minimalist + Evaluative                | General impression → Clothing               |
| Squire    | Curly hair, embroidered clothes, youthful, fresh face                          | Youth, vanity, romantic inclination, vitality           | Extended + Evaluative                  | General impression → Hair → Face → Clothing |
| Yeoman    | Green hood, brown face, well-equipped (bow, arrows)                            | Outdoorsman, reliability, practical skill               | Concentrated                           | Clothing → Skin tone → Equipment            |
| Prioress  | Elegant nose, soft red mouth, blue eyes, wide forehead, small, slender fingers | Beauty, affectation, courtly pretension                 | Extended + Evaluative + Concentrated   | Face → Eyes → Forehead → Hands → Clothing   |
| Monk      | Fat, bald, shiny face, prominent eyeballs, fine clothes (fur-lined, gold pin)  | Worldliness, sensuality, corruption of religious ideals | Extended + Evaluative                  | Body type → Head → Eyes → Clothing          |
| Friar     | Twinkling eyes, white neck, rounded physique, well-dressed                     | Immorality, indulgence, social climbing                 | Extended + Evaluative + Deconcentrated | Neck → Physique → Clothing → Eyes           |

|                    |                                                                                        |                                                     |                                      |                                              |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Merchant           | Forking beard, motley dress, Flemish beaver hat                                        | Self-importance, social aspiration, deception       | Concentrated + Evaluative            | Beard → Clothing → Headwear                  |
| Clerk (Oxford)     | Hollow look, threadbare clothes                                                        | Intellectualism, poverty, virtue                    | Minimalist + Evaluative              | Face → Clothing                              |
| Sergeant at Law    | Homely, discreet dress, wise appearance                                                | Respectability, intelligence, possible manipulation | Minimalist                           | Clothing → General impression                |
| Franklin           | White beard, rosy complexion, jolly appearance                                         | Wealth, hospitality, hedonism                       | Concentrated + Evaluative            | Beard → Complexion → Overall appearance      |
| Guildsmen          | Well-dressed, polished gear                                                            | Social ambition, pride in craft                     | Deconcentrated                       | Clothing → Accessories                       |
| Cook               | Ulcer on his knee                                                                      | Physical repulsiveness, moral decay                 | Minimalist + Evaluative              | Specific detail (ulcer)                      |
| Shipman            | Tan skin, dagger around neck                                                           | Danger, boldness, lack of morality                  | Minimalist                           | Skin tone → Weapon                           |
| Doctor of Medicine | Red and blue garments, loves gold                                                      | Greed, commercialism in medicine                    | Extended + Evaluative                | Clothing → Preferences                       |
| Wife of Bath       | Pale face, gap teeth, red cheeks and lips, large hips, red stockings, large hat, shoes | Lust, strong will, sexual confidence                | Extended + Evaluative + Concentrated | Clothing → Shoes → Face → Teeth → Body shape |
| Parson             | Lean                                                                                   | Spiritual purity, moral integrity                   | Minimalist                           | Physique → General impression                |
| Plowman            | Simple dress, honest appearance                                                        | Christian virtue, humility                          | Minimalist + Evaluative              | Clothing → General impression                |
| Miller             | Broad, red beard, wart on nose, black nostrils, wide mouth, stout build, hooded cloak  | Aggression, vulgarity                               | Concentrated + Evaluative            | Build → Beard → Nose → Mouth → Clothing      |
| Manciple           | No detailed description                                                                | Cleverness, shrewdness                              | Minimalist                           | Not applicable                               |
| Reeve              | Slender, choleric, short hair, shaven beard, long legs, blue coat                      | Secretiveness, bitterness                           | Deconcentrated + Evaluative          | Build → Hair → Beard → Legs → Clothing       |
| Summoner           | Fire-red face, carbuncles, scabby brows, narrow eyes, stinking breath                  | Corruption, lust, drunkenness                       | Extended + Concentrated + Evaluative | Face → Skin problems → Eyes → Breath         |
| Pardoner           | Long yellow hair, bulging eyes, smooth face, high-pitched voice                        | Deceit, greed, spiritual emptiness                  | Extended + Evaluative + Concentrated | Hair → Eyes → Face → Voice                   |

## Conclusion

This paper examines the verbal portrait of literary characters and their classification based on Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The study demonstrates the significance of verbal portraiture as a powerful stylistic and semantic tool in literature. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer employs physical descriptions to illuminate characters' moral traits and social roles within medieval society.

Various typologies about the issue highlight different aspects of character portraits, such as length, structural distribution, and narrative function. The analysis draws on three principal frameworks: Gabel's minimalist and extended portraits (Gabel, 1964), Bazilova and Suleimanova's concentrated and deconcentrated portraits (Bazilova & Suleimanova, 2012), and Bepalov's sketchy, evaluative, situational, and descriptive portraits (Bepalov, 2001).

Character portraits are not rigid; they evolve with the narrative and often serve multiple functions. Consequently, these categories are fluid and frequently overlap. Minimalist portraits depict noble characters (the Knight, the Clerk, the Parson, the Plowman) or those primarily defined by professional roles (the Yeoman, the Sergeant at Law, the Cook, the Shipman, the Manciple). Extended portraits emphasise materialistic traits, with greater attention to physical detail correlating with moral corruption.

Both concentrated and deconcentrated portraits may depict virtuous or flawed characters. In deconcentrated portraits, Chaucer highlights appearance, actions, and moral qualities. Evaluative portraits often appear alongside other types, enriching characterisation and reinforcing authorial ideology. Attractive or sparsely described characters tend to possess positive traits, while unattractive characters are associated with negative qualities.

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