Across Time and Space: Teaching Chaucer in a Modern Classroom

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On average, my high school students spend approximately three hours a day on social media. Over the course of a week, they spend essentially the same amount of time in my classroom. What I find most intriguing about this comparison is that in both situations, my students are striving to determine truth and its value. Teenagers “use social media to tell stories and share their perception of truth, and it is also on these platforms that they seek truth.”¹ My preferred platform for seeking truth is classic literature; for my students’, it’s Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Each platform is fiction, and each is integral to understanding the power and duplicity of language, the connection (or lack thereof) of word and deed, and the “Boethanian principle that things can never be known directly according to the truth of their own nature, but only indirectly according to the limited nature of the knower.”² Works of fiction contain the imaginary, inventive, and fabricated as opposed to hard facts. But I side with Frank Lloyd Wright that “Truth is more important than facts.”³ At a time when the College Board, Common Core, and assessment consortia tell educators to increase non-fiction and informational texts in order to make students “college and career ready,” I stand firmly in the idea that it is through fiction that we discover the truths in our own lives. Why? Because ultimately truth is a construct that we create to better understand the world. We need to spend even more time teaching students how to analyze fiction because, in the words of Mark Edmundson in Why
Read?, “the truth – the circle, the vision of experience – that they have encountered through socialization is inadequate. It doesn’t put them into a satisfying relation to experience.”⁴ Analyzing fiction uncovers truths about life, human nature, and core values, which then translate throughout students’ interactions with twenty-first-century distortions. Humans endeavor to create and tell stories. And narrative is rooted in human experience. It is with this in mind that, notwithstanding the exclusion of medieval texts from the College Board’s *AP Literature and Composition Course Description*, I have found the greatest success and highest student engagement through the use of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* to explore truth as a means of both deception and self-knowledge and as a vehicle for students to gain a better understanding of their place in the world.

The power of language to distort or confirm truth is a basic tenet in my classroom; it is through wrestling with the duplicity of language in *The Canterbury Tales* that my high school students confront their own methods for obscuring and revealing their own truths. Chaucer states in the *General Prologue* that “The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede” (I.742).⁵ This phrase has always struck me as pre-apsarian: word and deed are one. From this perspective, word and action are intrinsically linked. As John A. Alford contends,

Words are deeds, and deeds are words. The fusion of the two is encouraged, above all, by the Bible. For example, the Hebrew word *dabhar*, which occurs frequently in the Old Testament, can mean both “word” and “deed.” For medieval scholars, in fact, the Genesis account of creation was amazingly concentrated in the deliberate ambiguity of this single word.⁶

Continuing from this perspective, all that is said in the tales accurately reflects both in the words spoken and the actions that follow. Alford goes further, “Words and deeds are simply
manifestations, in different modes, of the same moral reality.”⁷ My students work through this interpretation first. Are word and deed synonymous? Is morality influenced by language and vice versa? Are word and deed equally tied to intent? And if so, what is Chaucer’s intent in relaying in the General Prologue some aspect of the words, appearance, and character of each pilgrim?

As I tell my students, there is, however, an alternative way of interpreting cosyn via the word “cozen: to mislead by means of a petty trick or fraud; deceive.”⁸ Considered in this sense, a word may be diametrically opposed to the deed that follows. This model follows a post-lapsarian frame of reference where language has fallen and is full of “tropes and verbal tricks.”⁹ Fidelity is lost and language becomes a means of manipulation. If the word loses integrity, what then is the speaker’s intent? And, equally importantly, what role does intent play when determining what is true? Our classroom discussion inevitably shifts to a more personal analysis of the ways in which students portray themselves in word and deed, particularly via social media. Do their tweets, insta-stories, and Facebook posts accurately depict the truths of their situation? If not, what is their intent in the deception? These questions cause them to consider individual and universal definitions of perspective, reality, faith, morality, and, ultimately, truth itself. Other questions arise as well:

- Can a person post something that is factually inaccurate yet honest?
- Can words be factual and yet untrue?
- Does truth have an identity all its own, more holistic, with a stronger tie to faith and morality?¹⁰
- Or, does truth exist at all? And, more importantly, do we care?
These questions and subsequent conversation lead to a deeper analysis of language, tone, and theme as well as highlight a key component of digital citizenship: students as smart and effective participants in an increasingly digital world.

These conversations happen in large part because students are allowed to step out of their own reality and into a fourteenth-century, fictional pilgrimage. Cristina Vischer Bruns argues that students “gain perspective on their own world by getting out of it for a time and into a world very distant from their own, an opportunity for contact with a culture separated from theirs by centuries.” This argument is particularly important when considering two recent studies of teenagers in the post-truth era that found that despite the fact that today’s students are considered “digital natives,” they are startlingly unable to detect and analyze bias, fake news, or truth claims. They struggle with intent. Additionally, today’s teenagers are extremely vulnerable to what Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bower call “directional motivated reasoning,” that is, a preference towards evidence that supports existing beliefs, a tendency to quickly dismiss arguments that contradict their current understanding, and a subconscious need to judge arguments that correspond with their convictions as being more authentic and trustworthy. This desire to cling to and defend preexisting beliefs even when presented with contradictory information is not a novel tendency, but it has been heightened and aggravated by students’ prodigious daily consumption of social media. Students’ deeply felt presumptions about their current reality are obstacles to expansive thinking, and hinder them from engaging in critical thinking and the development of alternate views. In order to actively engage in critical thinking instead of passively following the train of comments, likes, and emojis, students need more experiences with texts that invite multiple interpretations, “embrace complexity, and accelerate developmental progress.” Engaging students in tasks that require them “to justify their
opinions,” while simultaneously encouraging them to consider multiple perspectives and prompting them to reflect on their reasoning process can diminish directional motivated thinking. Literary fiction gives them a healthy distance to more accurately determine and compare the views, motivations, faults, and biases of characters, narrators, and writers in relation to their own. By stepping out of their own reality, students have the opportunity to critique and appraise what they value and thereby determine truth in an arena where there is no fear of personal loss.

I choose *The Canterbury Tales* as our lead text because Chaucer so brilliantly and coyly blurs the lines between word and meaning, action and thought, deed and intent. Students find themselves in the tales because Chaucer encourages us to examine all sides of an issue and to view language as a catalyst for discovery. And while Chaucer asserts his fidelity to the storytellers’ language, his word choice belies an ulterior motive. My students become agents in their own examination and discovery of truth in a fictional world, leading them toward a recognition of the value of truth in their own day-to-day interactions with the world at large. Being a teenager (or an adult, for that matter) is about shaping your own reality, about trying on new personae, outfits, and hobbies, and determining who you are and whom you want to be. Social media raise the stakes as truth, self-discovery, and self-deception are on display to friends and strangers alike. And the instantaneous feedback given by likes, retweets, and commentary makes truth even harder to discern. In a digital world, we have lost the ability to recognize and tell the truth, and only through fiction can we find what portion of it we value.

As we progress through the tales, my students revisit these quandaries again and again, augmenting their sense of reality and truth, perception and intent. We draw frequent connections between the past and the present, fiction and truth. For example, we examine word and deed and
the paradoxical nature of language to be both truthful and deceptive through the Yeoman devil and the Summoner’s dissection of intention and purpose (entente and entende) in the Friar’s Tale. The Franklin’s Tale breeds lively discussion on the power of words and the illusion of truth when dissecting the potential disparity between trouthe and entente. This tale, in particular, lends itself to intense student engagement as we examine conditional language and the dichotomy of public versus private forums. Pair it with the Shipman’s Tale, and the complex relationship between word and deed, deception versus truth, becomes fertile ground for a discussion of the ways in which social media distort truths, underscoring our theme of appearance versus reality. The Pardoner’s Tale, the Canon Yeoman’s Tale, and finally the Manciple’s Tale all frame narratives that question the value of truth, and through reflective inquiry, lead readers to conclude that through fiction we gain a better understanding of the world.

Referencing Lisa Zunshine’s Why We Read Fiction, Bruns argues that reading fiction engages and exercises two broad mental faculties that are essential for social functioning. First is our ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, or beliefs – to recognize the mind behind the action – and second is our ability to keep track of the source of what we are told even through several levels of “embedment” (as in, “she said that he said that you thought….”). Making sense of the human world around us requires both of these skills in order to recognize the likely meanings of actions and to identify the reliability of the sources of representations. In essence, reading fiction helps us to ascertain truth and to determine the intent behind both word and deed.

Working through The Canterbury Tales (especially in the original Middle English) challenges students to be patient, active, moral thinkers, using skills that they are often unable
or unwilling to access in their digital lives. Truth, like fiction, is complicated. Thanks to our current digital age, students often enter my classroom with the belief that knowledge acquisition should be immediate, conveniently fitting into a currently held world view, that there is one right answer, and that sources are either factual or untrue. Throughout our reading of the tales, we evaluate bias; uncover connections between language, intent, action, and power; and locate the voices that are missing from the narrative. We are constantly questioning why and reflecting on the value of truth. Fiction allows students the freedom to challenge assumptions, question norms, and step into a world where while there are some “wrong” answers, there is never just one “right” one. Reading *The Canterbury Tales* in this way teaches critical thinking skills, self-reflection, perseverance, the value and danger of duplicity, and the power of language, even as it reminds us that sometimes devils, like the one in the “Friar’s Tale,” can be honest and men who should be honest, like Friar or the Summoner, tell lies. Through interaction with Chaucer’s fictional worlds, students are empowered to create and re-create their sense of self and challenge their assumptions about the world we live in. Through a fourteenth-century fiction, they discover their personal twenty-first-century truths.

Notes


2 Carolyn Van Dyke, *Chaucer’s Agents: Cause and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative*. (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2005), 250, in reference to Chaucer’s *Boece* V. pr 6.1-8,


7 Ibid.


15 Ibid.; see also Joseph Kahne, and Benjamin Bower, “Educating for Democracy.”

16 Cristina Vischer Bruns, Why Literature?, 12.

Works Cited


