

Summary & Analysis of The Nun's Priest's Tale

Summary

A very poor widow lives in a small cottage with her two daughters. Her main possession is a noble cock called Chaunticleer. This rooster is beautiful, and nowhere in the land is there a cock who can match him in crowing. He is the master, so he thinks, of seven lovely hens. The loveliest of these is the beautiful and gracious Lady Pertelote. She holds the heart of Chaunticleer and shares in all his glories and all his problems.

One spring morning, Chaunticleer awakens from a terrible dream of a beast roaming in the yard trying to seize him. This beast's color and markings were much the same as a fox. Lady Pertelote cries out, "For shame . . . Fie on you / heartless coward" ("Avoi (coward) . . . fy on you, herteless") and tells him that being afraid of dreams is cowardly and that, by showing such fear, he has lost her love. She tells him he dreamed because he ate too much and that it is well known that dreams have no meaning; he simply needs a laxative. Chaunticleer graciously thanks Lady Pertelote, but he quotes authorities who maintain that dreams have a very definite meaning and insists that he does not need a laxative.

Later, Chaunticleer catches sight of a fox named Don Russel, who is hiding near the farmyard. Chaunticleer begins to run, but the fox gently calls out that he only came to hear Chaunticleer's beautiful voice. Hearing this, the vain cock shuts his eyes and bursts into song. At that moment, the fox races to the cock, grasps him about the neck, and makes off with him. The hens in the barnyard make such a terrible commotion that they arouse the entire household. Soon the widow, her two daughters, the dogs, hens, geese, ducks, and even the bees, are chasing the fox.

Chaunticleer suggests to the fox to turn around and shout insults at his pursuers. The fox, thinking Chaunticleer's idea a good one, opens his mouth, and Chaunticleer nimbly escapes to a treetop. The fox tries once again to lure Chaunticleer down by compliments and flattery, but the rooster has learned his lesson.

At the conclusion of the tale, the Host praises the Nun's Priest. Observing the Priest's magnificent physique, he comments that, if the Priest were secular, his manhood would require not just seven hens, but seventeen. He thanks "Sir Priest" for the fine tale and turns to another for the next tale.

Analysis

The Nun's Priest's Tale is one of Chaucer's most brilliant tales, and it functions on several levels. The tale is an outstanding example of the literary style known as a *bestiary* (or a *beast fable*) in which animals behave like human beings. Consequently, this type of fable is often an insult to man or a commentary on man's foibles. To suggest that animals behave like humans is to suggest that humans often behave like animals.

This tale is told using the technique of the *mock-heroic*, which takes a trivial event and elevates it into something of great universal import. Alexander Pope's poem *The Rape of the Lock* is an excellent example a mock-heroic composition; it treats a trivial event (the theft of a lock of hair, in this case) as if it were sublime. Thus when Don Russel, the fox, runs off with Chaunticleer in his jaws, the chase that ensues involves every creature on the premises, and the entire scene is narrated in the elevated language found in the great epics where such language was used to

enhance the splendid deeds of epic heroes. Chaucer uses elevated language to describe a fox catching a rooster in a barnyard — a far cry from the classic epics. The chase itself reminds one of Achilles' chasing Hector around the battlements in the *Iliad*. To compare the plight of Chaunticleer to that of Homer's Hector and to suggest that the chase of the fox is an epic chase similar to classical epics indicates the comic absurdity of the situation.

The mock-heroic tone is also used in other instances: when the Nun's Priest describes the capture of the Don Russel and refers to the event in terms of other prominent traitors (referring to the fox as "a new Iscariot, a second Ganelon and a false hypocrite, Greek Sinon") and when the barnyard animals discuss high philosophical and theological questions. For Lady Pertelote and Chaunticleer to discuss divine foreknowledge in a high intellectual and moral tone in the context of barnyard chickens is the height of comic irony. We must also remember the cause of the discussion of divine foreknowledge: Lady Pertelote thinks that Chaunticleer's dream or nightmare was the result of his constipation, and she recommends a laxative. Chaunticleer's rebuttal is a brilliant use of classical sources that comment on dreams and is a marvelously comic means of proving that he is not constipated and does not need a laxative. Throughout the mock-heroic, mankind loses much of its human dignity and is reduced to animal values.

The Nun's Priest's ideas and positions are set up in his genially ironic attitude toward both the simple life of the widow and the life of the rich and the great as represented by the cock, Chaunticleer (in Chaucer's English, the name means "clear singing"). The Nun's Priest's opening lines set up the contrast. A poor old widow with little property and small income leads a sparse life, and it does not cost much for her to get along. The implication is that living the humble Christian life is easier for the poor than for the rich, who have, like Chaunticleer, many obligations and great responsibilities (after all, if Chaunticleer does not crow at dawn, the sun cannot rise).

The Nun's Priest contrasts the two human worlds of the poor and the rich in the description of the poor widow and the elegant Chaunticleer. The widow's "bour and halle" (bedroom) was "ful sooty," that is black from the hearth-flame where she had eaten many a slim or slender meal. Notice the contrast: The term "bour and halle" comes from courtly verse of the time and conjures up the image of a castle. The idea of a "sooty bower" or hall is absurd: The rich would never allow such a thing. Yet soot is inevitable in a peasant's hut, and from the peasant's point of view, the cleanliness fetish of the rich may also be absurd. A slender meal ("sklendre meel") would of course be unthinkable among the rich, but it is all the poor widow has. Likewise, the widow has no great need of any "poynaunt sauce" because she has no gamey food (deer, swan, ducks, and do on) nor meats preserved past their season, and no aristocratic recipes. She has "No dayntee morsel" to pass through her "throte," but then, when Chaucer substitutes the word "throat" ("throte) for the expected "lips," the dainty morsel that the image calls up is no longer very dainty. The aristocratic disease gout does not keep the widow from dancing, but it's unlikely that she dances anyway. Dancing is for the young or rich. As a pious lower-class Christian, she scorns dancing of all kinds. In short, the whole description of the widow looks ironically at both the rich and the poor.

When the Nun's Priest turns to Chaunticleer, he begins to comment on the life of the rich in other ironic ways. Chaunticleer has great talents and grave responsibilities, but the cock's talent (crowing) is a slightly absurd one, however proud he may be of it. (In middle English, as in modern, "crowing" can also mean boasting or bragging.) And Chaunticleer's responsibility, making sure the sun does not go back down in the morning, is ludicrous. His other responsibilities — taking care of his wives — are equally silly. Part of the Nun's Priest's method in his light-hearted analysis of human pride is an ironic identification of Chaunticleer with everything noble that he can think of. His

physical description, which uses many of the adjectives that would be used to describe the warrior/knight (words such as "crenelated," "castle Wall," "fine coral," "polished jet," "azure," "lilies," and "burnished gold," for example) reminds one of an elegant knight in shining armor.

The reader should be constantly aware of the ironic contrast between the barnyard and the real world, which might be another type of barnyard. That is, the "humanity" and "nobility" of the animals is ironically juxtaposed against their barnyard life. This contrast is an oblique comment on human pretensions and aspirations in view of the background, made clear when Don Russel challenges Chaunticleer to sing, and the flattery blinds Chaunticleer to the treachery. Here, the tale refers to human beings and the treachery found in the court through flattery. Chaunticleer's escape is also effected by the use of flattery. Don Russel learns that he should not babble or listen to flattery when it is better to keep quiet. And Chaunticleer has learned that flattery and pride go before a fall.

"Character Analysis"

The Nun's Priest The Nun's Priest is not described in the General Prologue. His story of Chanticleer, however, is well crafted and suggests that he is a witty, self-effacing preacher.