

THE CANTERBURY TALES

By Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400)

Introduction

Today, Chaucer (1343-1400) is acclaimed not only as the father of English poetry but also as the father of English literature. Readers are indebted to him for the most vivid contemporary description of England in the **Medieval** period. Chaucer's whole life can be divided into three periods. The first period, about 30 years, including his youth and early manhood, is the period of French influence. Chaucer's main works in this period were translations from French. The second period, about 15 years, covers Chaucer's active life as a diplomat and man of affairs. In this period, the Italian influence seemed to be stronger than the French. The major works by Chaucer in this period were adaptations from Italian writers. The third period, covering his last 15 years, is generally known as the English period. It is the period of Chaucer's richest development. His masterpiece, **The Canterbury Tales**, one of the most famous works in all literature, fills the third period. In this great work, the author gives his reader a picture of English society in Middle Ages.

-Life and Works of Chaucer (1340 -1400)

Geoffery Chaucer is generally hailed as the Father of English poetry. He was a courtier during the rule of Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV. On several occasions he was sent on diplomatic assignments to France and Italy, which brought him under the literary influence of those countries. During his lifetime England witnessed a terrible plague called the Black Death, bringing poverty and revolt among the peasants. Chaucer's death marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern period. He was the first poet to be buried in the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. It is usual to divide Chaucer's poetry into three periods: the French, the Italian and the English, of which the English is the best.

The poems of the French group are modeled upon French Originals. Chaucer wrote two major poems under the French influence – The Romaunt of the Rose and The Boke of the Duchesse. The former is an incomplete translation of a French allegory, Roman de la Rose, describing the pleasures of love, symbolized by Rose. The Boke of the Duchesse is an elegy on the death of Duchess Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt, Chaucer's patron. It is in the form of a French dream poem.

The second stage, the Italian period, shows an advance upon the earlier stage. The Parliament of Fowls, The House of Fame, The Legend of Good Women and Troilus and Cryseyde belong to this period. The Parliament of Fowls commemorates the marriage of Richard II with Anne. It is also a dream poem, written in "Chaucerian Stanza", riming ababbcc. The House of Fame is another dream allegory celebrating the wedding of Richard II with Anne. The Legende of Good Women tells the stories of the faithful lovers of nine heroines. Troilus and Cryseyde narrates how Troilus, the Trojan prince falls in love with a Greek Girl called Cressid.

The third English period contains the work of the greatest individual accomplishment. Chaucer's masterpiece, The Canterbury Tales belongs to this period. It is a series of twenty four tales told by pilgrims on their way to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury. A Prologue tells how the pilgrims pass the nights before the journey at the Tabard Inn and decide to tell two tales on their way to Canterbury and two on their way back. The pilgrims hail from different places and belong to different professions. The work is remarkable for Chaucer's gift of storytelling and skill in characterization.

-Features of Chaucer's Writing

Chaucer uses vivid and exact words. His poetry is full of vigour and swiftness. Chaucer's great contribution to English poetry is that he introduced from France the **rhyming couplet of iambic pentameter** (which was later called the "**heroic couplet**") to English poetry, and used it in his masterwork. This poetical form gradually took the place of the old alliterative verse form in Chaucer's day. Chaucer is the first great poet who wrote in the **current English language**. He wrote his poetry using the east midland dialect of England, the **dialect of London**. So he did much in making the dialect of London the foundation of modern English speech, and in establishing English as the literary language of the country. Chaucer's style in *The Canterbury Tales* is remarkably flexible. His prose, like his vocabulary, is easy and informal. Chaucer is a **great satirist**, but his satire is not bitter when he pokes fun at the foibles and weaknesses of people.

The Canterbury Tales

It is a collection of stories written in Middle English in 1387–1400. It is a **frame narrative** because it is a story that includes many stories. It is an **estate satire** as it refers to Chaucer's selection of characters from various social categories (3 Medieval estates: Peasantry, Church, Nobility) criticizing and commenting on different social ills. Both Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are 14th-century collections of short tales set within a **frame story** involving a group of people taking turns to tell stories one at a time; that is to say that Chaucer was inspired by Boccaccio's work to write his collection. *The Canterbury Tales* is generally thought to have been incomplete at the end of Chaucer's life.

The whole book consists of a prologue and 24 tales. In the prologue, the author reveals his plan for writing this work, and also vividly describes some 30 tale-tellers. The prologue tells the readers that one day in spring the author comes into the Tabard Inn in Southwark at the south end of London Bridge. Here he meets some 29 pilgrims, who are going to Canterbury (three of the pilgrims are women). Then he joins this company, which includes all the classes of English society. At supper, the host of the inn suggests that in order to enliven the journey, each of the pilgrims tell two stories on the going journey and another two on the returning journey. The best storyteller shall be treated with a fine supper at general expense when they come back. The host will be the judge of the contest.

According to the number of persons in the company, 30, evidently the author planned to produce an immense work of 120 tales. Actually, only 24 were written before Chaucer's death. These tales were written in various forms of medieval literature: **romances of knights and ladies; folk tales; animal fables; stories of travels and adventures; legends, allegories** and so on. Twenty-two tales were written in **verse** form and only two in **prose** form.

The prologue comprises a group of vivid sketches of typical medieval figures. The 30 pilgrims depicted by Chaucer represent all classes of the English feudal society, except the royalty and the poorest peasants. They range from the knight and squire, and prioress, through the landed proprietor and wealthy tradesman, down to the drunken cook and humble plowman. There are also a doctor, a lawyer, monks of different orders, nuns, priests, a summoner, a sailor, a miller, a carpenter, a yeoman (a small independent farmer), and an Oxford scholar. In the centre of the group is the Wife of Bath, the owner of a large cloth-making factory. Every figure is drawn with the accuracy of a portrait. The portraits of the 30 pilgrims supply a miniature of the English society in Chaucer's time. Therefore, Chaucer is regarded by many writers as "**The Founder of English Realism**"

-Social Significance of The Canterbury Tales

In his masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer gives us a true-to-life picture of the society of his time. Taking the stand of the rising bourgeoisie, he affirms man's right to pursue happiness and opposes the dogma of asceticism preached by the church. As a forerunner of humanism, he praises man's energy, intellect, quick wit and love of life. His tales expose and satirize the social evils of his time. They condemn the degeneration of the noble, the heartlessness of the judge and the corruption of the church. Living in a transitional period, Chaucer is not entirely devoid of medieval prejudices. He is religious himself. There is nothing revolutionary in his writing, though he lived in a period of peasant uprising. When praising man's spirit to pursue earthly happiness, he sometimes likes to crack a rough joke and paint naturalistic pictures of sexual life. These are Chaucer's weak points. But these are, however, of secondary importance compared with his achievement as a great poet and storyteller.

-Order of Characters and Tales

Chaucer, appearing as one of the characters in the story, describes the others when he meets them at the Tabard Inn at Southwark. The majority of the characters will tell a tale to the others as they ride toward Canterbury. These are, in the order they appear in *The General Prologue*:

- Chaucer-the-pilgrim who narrates the work; tells the 17th and 18th tales
- The Knight – a man of honor, truth, and chivalry; tells the 1st tale
- The Squire - the knight's son, a gentle youth of poetic sensibilities; tells the 11th tale
- The Yeoman – the knight's servant; no tale
- The Prioress (Madame Eglentyne) – a nun who supervises a priory; tells the 15th tale
- The Second Nun – secretary to the Prioress; tells the 21st tale
- The Nun's Priest – one of three priests traveling with the Prioress; tells the 20th tale
- The Monk – a worldly lover of hunting, riding, and drinking; tells the 18th tale
- The Friar (Huberd) – a corrupt clergyman who keeps donations for himself; tells the 7th tale
- The Merchant – a somber man who distrusts women; tells the 10th tale
- The Clerk – a scholar from Oxford University; tells the 9th tale
- The Sergeant of the Law (Man of Law) – a wealthy lawyer; tells the 5th tale
- The Franklin (landowner) – a glutton, companion of Man of Law; tells the 12th tale
- The Five Tradesmen: Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, and Tapestry Weaver, all traveling together; described in General Prologue but no speaking parts
- The Cook (Roger) – works for the above tradesmen, loves to drink; tells 4th tale
- The Shipman – a ship's captain; tells 14th tale
- The Doctor of Physic (physician) – a greedy astrologer; tells 13th tale
- The Wife of Bath (Alisoun) – a widow who has survived five husbands and traveled the world; tells 6th tale
- The Parson – a devout and honest clergyman; tells the 24th (last) tale
- The Plowman – the Parson's brother, devout and charitable; no speaking part
- The Miller (Robyn) – coarse, rough, and fond of drinking and stealing; tells the 2nd tale
- The Manciple (caterer) – purchases food for establishments; tells the 23rd tale
- The Reve (Osewald) – manager of an estate, an accountant; tells the 3rd tale
- The Summoner – server of summons to ecclesiastical courts; tells the 8th tale
- The Pardoner – seller of indulgences (pardons) and fake holy relics, rides with the Summoner; tells the 14th tale
- The Host (Harry Bailey) – Innkeeper at the Tabard where the pilgrims begin their journey, proposes the story-telling contest and moderates/settles disputes
- The Canon's Yeoman – not introduced in the General Prologue; meets the pilgrims along the way; tells 22nd tale

-The work ends up with a **Retraction** where the writer apologizes for having included a violent content.

-The Tale of Melibee: Chaucer's Tale

Chaucer is a character who tells two stories, one in verse (The Tale of Sir Thopas) and another in prose (The Tale of Melibee/ Melibeus) which is briefly about Melibee and his wife Dame Prudence. When Melibee and his wife are away, three burglars break into their home and grievously injure their daughter, Sophia. Melibee decides to avenge himself, but his wife, Dame Prudence, talks him into getting advice and then convinces him that, of all the advice he has gotten, her own advice is the best. The three burglars are found and brought before Dame Prudence, who suggests a peaceful settlement. Her husband, Melibee, decides to let them off with a fine, but Dame Prudence vetoes this. Melibee then forgives the burglars, rebukes them, and extols his own magnanimity.

-The Knight's Tale

Palamon and Arcite are two young Theban knights. They are cousins and sworn-brothers. In a battle, both of them are found wounded on the battlefield. So they are taken prisoners by the Duke of Athens. One day from the prison window they behold the fair maid Emily (or Emiley), who is the sister-in-law of the Duke. Both of the young men fall desperately in love with the lady. For this reason their friendship ruptures. To decide who should marry the lady, a grand tournament is held. Arcite, who has prayed to God of war, Mars, wins. But unfortunately he is thrown off the horse and dies, thus losing the lady in the very hour of his triumph. Palamon, who has prayed to Venus, Goddess of love, marries Emily after much sorrow. The subject matter of the story was borrowed from Boccaccio's tales. It is one of the best tales in the book.

-The Pardoner's Tale

Once upon a time, there are three rioters in Flanders, who do nothing every day but drink, gamble and play cards and dice day and night. One day while they are sitting in a tavern drinking, they see some men carrying a coffin pass by. They are told that Death has killed many people in the village nearby. The three rioters decide to find Death in order to slay him. So they set out to look for Death. On their way to the village they meet an old man who directs them in their search. But finally instead of meeting Death, they find under an oak tree a heap of golden florins. In order to celebrate the happy finding the youngest is sent to town to buy bread and wine. While the other two are waiting for him, they make a plan to murder him when he comes back. When the youngest arrives in town, an evil idea comes into his mind. He thinks if he puts his two companions to death he will possess the heap of gold. So he buys some poison and puts it into the wine. When he comes back, his two companions kill him just as they have planned. Then the two murderers sit down to eat and drink. Both die of poison. At last all the three rioters find Death as they wished.

NB: The tales protagonists, secondary characters, themes, plot, antagonists, narrators and settings are highly varied and separated. Each tale is unique in its literary elements and devices.