Centre for Distance and Online Education
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Class : M.A. I (English) **Semester : 1**
Paper : I (Introduction to Poetry: Medieval and Renaissance)
Medium : English **Unit : 1**

Lesson No.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER: PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES

1.1 Introductory : Geoffrey Chaucer : His Life and Works and Contribution to English Literature

1.2 (a) Prologue to the Canterbury Tales - A Brief Summary
(b) Geoffrey Chaucer : The Evening Star of the Medieval Age and The Morning Star of the Renaissance
(c) Nature of Medieval Poetry

1.3 (a) Geoffrey Chaucer's Characterisation
(b) Geoffrey Chaucer's Humour

1.4 (a) Geoffrey Chaucer's Realism
(b) Geoffrey Chaucer's Narrative Art

JOHN DONNE (POEMS)

1.5 : John Donne : Life and Works

1.6 : John Donne : A Critical Study of the Prescribed Poems-I

1.7 : John Donne : A Critical Study of the Prescribed Poems-II

1.8 : a. John Donne as a Metaphysical Poet
b. John Donne as a Poet of Love

M.A. (English) Part-I **COURSE-I**

SEMESTER-I **INTRODUCTION TO POETRY: MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE**

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER : The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales

STRUCTURE

1.1.0 OBJECTIVES-

1. To Introduce Geoffrey Chaucer's masterpiece the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales to students.
2. To discuss how Chaucer connects the Medieval age and the Renaissance through his path breaking work.
3. Chaucer as a social chronicler of the 14th century England.

1.1.1 CHAUCER'S LIFE AND WORKS - An Introduction

(i) Chaucer's Life (1340-1400)

The exact year of Geoffrey Chaucer's birth is not known, but it seems to have been around 1340. His grandfather and father had been vintners, or what at the present day would be called-keepers. The family name, is a word connected with the French "Chaucer" and signifies a "shoemaker". It is one of the frequent occurrences during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, especially in London and the eastern countries. The possession of such a name probably implies that the owners belonged to the well-to-do tradesman class.

The first definite information that we have about Chaucer is that he was

in the service of Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Ulster, who was married to Lionel, Duke of Clarence, one of the sons of Edward the Third. What Chaucer's position was in the household of the countess has not been clearly ascertained, but from some indirect evidence, it seems that he went to the French War in the suite of the Duke, even of the king himself. During the war he was taken prisoner by the French; and in March 1360, the king contributed the sum of sixteen pounds, the equivalent of two hundred and forty pounds of the present day, towards his ransom. For the next seven years, we have little knowledge of his career. He became a member of the king's household by 1367. Edward granted him a pension or annual salary, for life of 20 marks, nearly two hunderd pounds of the present day and in the document which gives him this grant, the king speaks of him as "Our honoured servant" which shows that he was already held in high esteem. The result of the grant was to raise Chaucer to the position of a Yeoman of the King's Chamber. Here his duties were those of an ordinary personal servant, and included serving in lord's chamber, the making of beds, holding and carrying of torches, and doing other duties that the king or the Chamberlain might require. By 1368, however he had become an Esquire of lesser degree. This gave him the right of bearing arms, and the nature of his duties was immediately changed. The Esquires of the king's household had an important office to fill with regard to the king's guests. In the afternoons and evenings, it was their duty to attend to the chambers of the different lords within the court, and there to keep honest Company after their cunning in talking of chronicles of kings and of other policies, or in piping or harping to occupy the court, and accompanying strangers till the time required of departing. For help to work of this kind which demanded tact, ability and knowledge of books and men, Chaucer seems to have been admirably fit. We shall presently see from his poems how wide a knowledge he had of his fellow creatures, and how keenly he observed the foibles and good points of people's characters. The natural gifts he possessed were cultivated and explained much to his advantage by this experience at court.

Chaucer seems always to have received patronage and kindness from John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, a son of Edward the Third, who had married the sister of Countess of Ulster, Chaucer's first patroness. In 1369, the Duchess of Lancaster died and Chaucer composed a poem known as "The Death of Blanche the Duchess" an allegorical lament for her disease. Chaucer himself married a young lady who was in the service of the queen, as one of the "damoisellers of the chamber".

Chaucer received conspicuous marks of favour in 1370, when he was sent abroad on the king's service. Two years later, he was made member of a commission to treat with the Duke and Citizens of Genoa for some port in England where Genoese merchants might settle and trade. In the course of his studies, for Chaucer was always an ardent reader, he had acquainted himself with the Italian language; this, doubtlessly, influenced his choice for the appointment.

On his return from the Genoese mission official work was given to him again. He received pensions for what he had done on the continent, and he was made Comptroller of the Customs in the port of London. In 1378, he was despatched on a secret diplomatic mission to Flanders, and later on in the same year to France for a similar purpose. King Edward died in 1377, but the advisers of the young king, the Second, were friendly to Chaucer, and until the early months of 1379 he continued in his diplomatic office. The most important event was a special mission to Lombardy when his stay in Italy lasted for more than a year, and here he seems to have largely increased his knowledge of Italian thought and learning. For more than five years longer Chaucer continued in his duties as Comptroller of the Customs. In 1385, having short period of leave granted to him he went on his immortal pilgrimage to Canterbury. He sat in Parliament for a short time towards the end of 1386, but when John of Gaunt was overthrown by the Duke of Gloucester another son of Edward III, Chaucer was immediately removed from his office.

It is believed that his wife died in 1387, for there is no record of the payment of her pension after that year. By his dismissal he lost the larger part of his own income, and was reduced at once to great poverty. It was not until 1389 that his fortunes began to mend. John of Gaunt in that year again won political power, and Chaucer, at once obtained employment from him. He was given the office to Clerk of the King's Works at Westminster Palace, the Tower of London, and various royal manors. His appointment lasted only a little time, and then he went through four years of extreme poverty, until Richard the Second in 1394 granted him twenty pounds a year for life. Henry the fourth, the son of John of Gaunt, did even more. He added to Richard's pension another forty marks a year, and Chaucer was able to make a comfortable home for his old age. He took a house at Westminster, in the Chapel Garden, and died within ten months of entering upon its possession. He was buried in St. Benet's Chapel in Westminster Abbey, at the spot that, since his time, has been known as

the Poet's Corner.

1.1.2 Chaucer's Contribution to English Literature

Geoffrey Chaucer was a pioneer in more than one respect. He has been hailed as the first great metrical artist, the first realist, the first one man entertainment industry, the first great character-painter and the first maker of modern English poerty. Shakespeare and Milton were the greatest sons of their country but Chaucer was the father of his country, rather in the style of George Washington. According to G.K. Chesterton, "He made a national language; he came near to making a nation."

Matthew Arnold says, "With him is born real poetry." Further, he has been credited not only with the "fatherhood" of English poerty, but has also been acclaimed as the father of English Drama before the drama was born and the father of English Novel before the novel was born. Let there be no mistake about his real position as literary artist. His importance is not due to precedence alone but due to excellence. Dryden has rightly called him "the fountain source of the vast stream of English Literature."

The content as well as form of English Poetry is indebted to Chaucer. Not only did he give English poetry a new dress, but a new body and a new soul. In the beginning of his literary journey, he wrote allegorical and dream poetry which in its content was as remote from life as a dream is from reality. But at the age of about fifty he realised that literature should deal first hand with life and the product of this realisation was *The Canterbury Tales* which holds a mirror to the life of Chaucer's age and reflects its manners and morals completely. The portraits of the pilgrims in "The Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales* constitutes not only an epitome of the society of 14th Century England but of the human nature in all times and all ages. Grierson and Smith have very aptly observed, "They (Pilgrims) are all with us today, though some of them have changed their names."

Chaucer is the greatest messenger and harbinger of the spirit of the joy of living, which the French call "Joie de vivre". No one can read Chaucer without feeling that it is good to be alive in this world however imperfect it may be in many respects. His poetry is free from harshness, bitterness, rancour and indignation. This tendency has made him a master of irony instead of satire. That is what Aldous Huxley says about him : "He looks on the smiles". Chaucer is credited with having introduced broad sympathy into English Literature. This quality he has bestowed on his Canterbury Tales, the character of perennial freshness which appears so abundantly

on its every page. To this wide sympathy, his poetry owes its friendliness and smiling affability. The joy of being alive or of beholding life, the pleasure of being amongst men, these are everywhere in his verse.

If we go after the substance, the greatness of Chaucer's poetry lies in its realism, its truth to nature. In fact truth is its magnet, Chaucer's realism is superbly exhibited in the portrayal of charaters in The Canterbury Tales. There are all sorts of persons and they are very realistically drawn. "Here is", as Dryden very aptly observed, "God's plenty." We have our forefathers and great grand dames all before us, as they were in Chaucer's days. In fact by the power of his supreme art, Chaucer lifts them to the plane of universality. The general traits of their character still remain in mankind, for mankind is everywhere the same.

Dryden calls Chaucer a perpetual fountain of good sense. This brings to our mind another great quality of Chaucer which is his humanism. Chaucer presents a large, free, simple, clear, yet kindly view of life. Aversion is a rare thing with him. He does not treat with disdain those whose foolishness he knew. He does not divide men into good and bad. He finds in the worst character something which is admirable while even in the best in them he detects some folly.

Chaucer appears as a worthy precursor of the race of novelists who came centuries afterwards. G.K. Chesterton calls him the grand father of the English Novel. His narration is lively and direct. His "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales* has been rightly called 'the Prologue to modern fiction'. According to George Meredith, "A novel should be summary of actual life". So, is indeed, the 'Prologue'. Several of the tales too, are novels in miniature and hold the attention of the reader from the beginning to the end, which alas, very few novels of today do. Charcer's *Troilus and Criseyde* has been called "a novel in verse". It has plot, character, unravelling action, conflict, rising action and denouement.

Chaucer has been called a dramatist and has abundantly shown the gift of a dramatist. The characters in the "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales* reveal themselves without the intervention of the writer through what they say and what they do. Aristotle says in drama, "Character" is all important. *The Canterbury Tales* presents a wonderful portrait gallery. A critic has rightly observed, "If the drama had been known in Chaucer's time, as a branch of living literature, he might have attained as high an excellence in comedy as any English or continental writer."

1.1.3 His Life and Works

His life and works are co-related. W. H. Hudson says: "In studying Chaucer's work it is important to remember that his education as a poet was two-fold, part of it came from literature, part of it came from life. He was a thorough student and in one of his autobiographical passages (in *The House of Fame)* he tells us how after a long day over his courts, he would go home at night and there pore over his beloved volumes till he was completely dazed. But he was not a mere bookman, nor was he in the least a visionary. Like Shakespeare and Milton he was on the contrary, a man of the world and of affairs. He had travelled much, he had seen life, his business at home and abroad brought him into intimate relations with people of all sorts; and with his quick insight into character and his keen eye for everything dramatic and picturesque and humourous, he was precisely the kind of poet to profit by such varied experience. There is much that is purely bookish in his writings; but in the best of them we are always aware that he is not merely drawing upon what he has read, but that his genius is being fed by his wide and deep knowledge of life itself.

Chaucer's Literary Career

Chaucer's literary career can be divided into three periods, i.e., the French period, the Italian period and the English period.

1. The French Period

Most of Chaucer's early works are translations or adaptations from French. Chaucer was probably of French extraction. He was accustomed to hear French which was spoken at court. His important poems of this period are *Le Roman de la Rose* and *The Book of the Duchesse.*

Le Roman de la Rose (or The Romance of the Rose) : As was inevitable for a court poet of his day, Chaucer entered literature through the French door. The earliest of his works which have come down to us is the fragment of a translation of the famous French allegory *Le Roman de La Rose* written in the thirteenth century by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung. This poem is the allegorical representation of a love affair in which the lady is symbolized by a rose-bud which the lover desires to pluck but it is kept beyond his reach. The poet writes many thousand lines for expressing various figures symbolizing such forces as modesty and shyness, the opposition of her parents, jealously, and envy, while the lover is aided by good looks, idleness, riches and the like and advised by Nature. The part of the poem written by the

second author contains a great variety of matters, such as social satire, remote from the main allegory and Chaucer, like hundreds of other medieval authors quotes the poem in all sorts of connections throughout his works. It was popular and influential poetical work of the whole period. The earliest of Chaucer's original poems of any length is *The Book of the Duchesse.* It is an elegy recording in an unusually graceful way the loss which John of Gaunt suffered in 1369, in the death of his first wife, Blanche. After relating a story which he has been reading, the tragic story of Ceys and Alcyone he falls asleep and dreams that he comes upon a knight dressed in black, sitting sorrowfully beneath a tree in the woods. The stranger recognizes his solitude and tells him the cause of his grief; he has played a game of chess with fortune and the goddess has taken away his queen. The poet seems not to understand quite what he means and he tells him in detail the story of his love, how 'he met one day a lady.' He describes her beauty accomplishments, gentle ways, soft speech, goodness. Her name was White. He finally persuaded her to accept his heart and they lived in a perfect bliss for many years. All this he relates sadly and at length. Now he has lost her:

"Alas, sir, how? What may that be ?

"She yes ded ! Nay? "Yis, be may trouthe." "Is that youre so?

Be God hyt ys routh!"

The simplicity and restraint of this close, the absence of strained sentiment, show the delicate instinct of the artist. The poet is greatly indebted in this poem to Mochaut, Froissart, Ovid and other poets. In fact, this poem is a mosaic of passages borrowed or remembered. But the concept and what is more important, the tone and treatment are Chaucer's own.

In addition to *The Book of the Duchesse,* there are a few other poems; *The Complaint upto Pity, The Complaint of Mars, Queen Anelida,* and *The ABC.* These are not considered to be important poems of Chaucer. They indicate that Chaucer was experimenting with various stanza forms. *The Complaint upto Pity* is written in a stanza common at the time in French which is called rhyme royal (The seven-line stanza).

2. The Italian period

Chaucer was brought into touch with the glorious Italian literature at the time of his mission in Italy in 1372. Petrarch and Boccaccio were still alive although Dante had died in 1321. Chaucer read their works and admired them. When, he wrote, he was profoundly inspired by them. Thus, his debt to Italian literature was enormous. In this respect, Moody remarks: "The one event in Chaucer's life which probably produced the profoundest effect on his literary career was his first visit to Italy in

1372. Italy was then approaching the zenith of her artistic energy, in the splendour of that illumination which had followed the intellectual, twilight of the Middle Ages, and which we know as the Renaissance, or "New Birth". Each of her little city-states was a centre of marvellous activity; and everywhere were being produced those masterpieces of painting, sculpture and architecture which still mark Italy a place of Pilgrimage for all lovers of art. The literary activity was equally great, at least in Tuscany. Dante had been dead for half a century, but his poetry was just beginning to be widely recognized as one of the major efforts of the human imagination. Patrarch, the grave accomplished scholar and elegant poet, was passing his closing years at his village of Arqua, near Padua; Boccaccio, a poet, talewriter pedant and worlding was spending the autumn of his life among the Cypress and laurel slopes of Fiesole above Florence. The World which lay open to Chaucer's gaze when he crossed the Alps. The scene was, therefore, one calculated to fascinate and stimulate him in the highest degree.

The characteristic works of the second period are *The Parlement of Foules, The House of Fame, Legend of Good Women,* and especially *Troilus and Criseyde.* Though they betray their direct borrowings and traces of limitation and suggestion, yet there are signs of a ripening originality, intellectual and literary vitality. He is no longer under the cramping influence of conventional models. He infused unquenchable and intellectual curiosity in these works.

The Parlement of Foules : Though *The Book of Duchess* has much grace and sincere feeling, yet it is much too long and contains one fault that Chaucer never entirely overcame, a tendency to parade knowledge in the form of intrusive learned allusions. These weaknesses, however, are greatly improved in the *Parlement of Foules,* this charming work, although written in Chaucerian stanza (rhyme royal), is generally associated with the poet's more mature work. It is an obvious example of St. Valentine Poetry. Valentine poetry is a species of composition celebrating the festival of St. Valentine and the mating season, which originated at the French court during the Second half of the fourteenth century. In conformity with this Valentine tradition, the *Parlement of Foules* describes how all kinds of fowls are assembled to choose mates under the benign eye of the goddess Nature. The poem may, therefore, be a political allegory, representing the arrangement of the nuptials between young Richard II and Anne of Bohemia, or possibly the unsuccessful attempts of Richard to Princess Marie of France. In either case, the poem must be dated between 1377 and 1382. It is not necessary, however, to assume this political allegory, at any rate it is hardly possible to prove its existence. But the charming rounding at the end of the work impresses the Valentine once and for all; and the delightful bickering of the birds, which are arranged in classes

suggestive of the divisions of the fourteenth century English Parliament, express a satirical spirit that cannot fail to appeal. Nor did Chaucer ever surpass in plain magnificence the opening line.

The lyf of short, the craft so to lerne.

The assay so hard, so sharp the conqerynge. The dreadful joys always that slit so yerne;

All this mene I by love .....

For that matter, he always had the happy gift of striking off memorable lines.

The House of Fame : For its extraordinary union or brilliant description with learning and humour, the poem of *The House of Fame* is sufficient in itself to justify Chaucer's reputation. It is written in the octosyllabic measure, and under the fashionable form of dream or vision, it gives us a vivid and striking picture of the Temple of Fame, crowded with aspirants for immortal renown, and adorned with myriad statues of great poets and historians and the *House of Rumour,* thronged with pilgrims, pardoners, sailors and Mother retailers of wonderful reports. The Temple, though originally borrowed from the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, exhibits with the Gothic details of medieval cathedrals, that strikes us in the poetry and in the illuminated manuscripts of the fourteenth century. In the description of the status of the great poets, we meet with a curious proof of that mingled influence of alchemical and astrological theories perceptible in science and literature of Chaucer's age. In richness of fancy it far surpasses Pope's imitation *The Temple of Fame.*

In form *The House of Fame* owes something to Dante's *Divine Comedy.* It is like Dante's poem, among three books though the last is not finished: it resembles Dante's poem in being a dream and as Dante represents himself as guided by Virgil, so does Chaucer tell us how he was guided by an eagle, moreover, there are many minor borrowings from and limitations of *The Divine comedy.* But in the poetic quality there can hardly be any comparison.Chaucer's sunny genius had none of the sombre depth and intensity of Dante. The religious note is absent, and *The House of Fame,* on the whole, is poorly planned. But Chaucer is still an imitator, borrowing freely. Here *House of Fame* again strikes a note of promise in its descriptive power as shown in the description of the temple of Venus, and the *House of Fame.* Most noteworthy, however, from the point of view of Chaucer's development, are the introduction of a personal note in Chaucer talking about himself to the eagle, and the strong vein of ironical humour observed in Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida.*

The Legend of Good Women : The allegorical element in *The Legend of Good Women* is confirmed in the "Prologue" in which the poet, who has

gone into the fields in May to adore his favourite flower, the daisy, is found by the god of love accompanied by the Greek heroine, Alcestis and a great train of ladies. The deity reproaches him for having written poems like his translation of the *Roman de La Rose* and *Troilus,* where women are pictured as faithless in love, but through the intercession of Alcestis, he is pardoned on condition that he should compose a series on women who were true to their vows. The rest of the poem, which like *The House of Fame,* is unfinished, consists of short accounts of eight notable ladies who died for love, such as Cleopatra, Dido, and Lucrece. The women are "good", not from the kingdom of love; and the whole poem is called a legend since it is a sort of parallel to the collections of saint's legends, the women being regarded as "saints of Cupid."

Note: All these aforesaid poems are allegories. The students should know the significance of the allegory. It was the common form of art prevailing in the middle ages. It is the art of double meaning, and in poetry it usually takes the form of a story underneath which is hidden a second significance, usually didactic or satirical. It is used much in the *Bible,* the parables of the New Testament being the best example. The early church fathers employed it freely, and it may be called the favourite form of the Middle Ages, only the romance rivalling it in popularity. It is an elaboration of the symbolism that runs through all medieval art and religion and no form of expression escaped its influence. Thus, in making so many of his works allegorical Chaucer was only following the fashion of his time. In the last phase of his career. i.e., the English period, he totally gave up allegorical elements in his poetry. He became a realist, ignoring the romantic and allegorical traits of the Medieval Age.

The scene of *Troilus and Criseyde* opens at Troy, during the seige of the city by the Greeks. The hero, Troilus is a son of Priam, and is second only to the mighty Hector in warlike deeds. Devoted as he is to glory, he scoffs at lovers until the moment when his eye lights on Cressida. She is a beautiful young widow, and is free to do as she pleases for the moment, her father Calchas having gone over to the Greeks to escape the doom which he sees impending on Troy. Troilus falls desperately in love with Cressida, but she does not know or care, and he is ashamed to speak his mind after scoffing so long at love. Then appears Pandarus, friend of Troilus and uncle to Cressida, who soon learns the secret and brings the young people together. After a long courtship with interminable speeches (as in the old romances) Troilus wins the lady and all goes on happily until Calchas arranges to have his daughter brought to him in exchange for a captured Trojan warrior. The lovers are separated with many tears, but Cressida comforts the despairing Troilus by promising to hoodwink the doting father and return in a few days. Calchas, however, loves his daughter too well to trust her in a city that must soon be

given over to plunder, and keeps her safe in the Greek camp. There handsome young Diomedes wins her, and presently Troilus is killed in battle by Achilles.

Chaucer's Source of Troilus and Criseyde : In order to write this poem Chaucer has made the fullest use of the *Filostrato*. Of the 713 stanzas of the Italian poem there are less than two hundred which find no verbal echo in the *Troilus.* Some of Boccaccio's stanzas are translated as closely as the exigencies of Chaucer's metrical form permit, some are parapharsed freely, and some furnish a suggestion which Chaucer elaborates at a greater length and in his own way. Since expansion is an almost inevitable concomitant of translation, it is not surprising to discover that one stanza of *Filostrato* often grows into two stanzas of the *Troilus.* Moreover, passages in the Italian poem which Chaucer does not utilize in their context are frequently drawn upon for other poems in the narrative, and lines occuring in episodes which are not reproduced in the *Troilus* are sometimes made to serve in very different surroundings. Although a detailed comparison of the two poems shows that not more than one-third of the lines of the *Troilus* are translated from the Italian original, the debt which Chaucer owes to Boccaccio is much greater than figures would indicate.

Of more important than verbal resemblance between the two poems, is the similarity that exists between them in plot and structure. Chaucer has added much of his own to the story which he found in *Filostrato;* but he has also taken over every important episode in Boccaccio's plot with the single exception of the scenes in Troilus chambers in which the ladies of the royal household seek to comfort the prince and are witnesses to the revelation of his love for Criseyde, made under the impulse of Cassandra's aunts.

Though *Troilus* is a borrowed story yet it has original traits. Thorndike has maintained, "So far the poems by Chaucer, we have described, were largely imitative of other authors, Latin, French and Italian, though they bore abundant evidences of Chaucer's individual quality and literary skill, *Troilus* too, is a borrowed story but in the manner of telling and especially in the drawing of a character and the minute description of the changing moods of the lovers and of the gradualness with which Troilus wins the lady, he added so much of his own that it may be regarded as his most original production. Not until we come to the modern novel, do we find such subtle and delicate discrimination of interest in personality so heavily outweighing mere incident.

Artistic Qualities of the Poem : Characters of the story are beautifully portrayed, *Troilus* is in many respects the typical court-love poetry. Troilus acts according to the accepted code. Modern readers sometimes find it

difficult to reconcile his power with his size and years. However, *Troilus* is more than a piece of convention and it is a tribute to Chaucer's art and insight that we are never allowed to forget that he is a man and what is more a man in every way worthy of the love of such an exquisite person as Criseyde. Criseyde has been developed with tender care. Chaucer reveals new graces at every turn. Still for all the charm of Criseyde and the meanliness of Troilus, it is Pandarus who sets the final seal on Chaucer's triumph. There was no precedent from him in *III Filostrato,* where Pandro is the cousin of Criseyde, the boon companion of Troilus and his exact contemporary. In Chaucer's hands he emerges as Criseyde's uncle, middle aged, yet not so old as to be incapable of feeling, on occasion, the pangs of despised love. His character is not easy to define in a few words. Chaucer never again attempted anything quite so complex. He gives us a picture of a man who is worldly wise but not cynical, humorous but not gross, and anxious that they should be happy. He certainly enjoys intrigue for its own sake, but he justifies his final deception of Criseyde of which he has the grace to be slightly ashamed by his conviction that he is acting in the best interest of both parties. And his grief when all end in ruin, and he realizes that he has shined for no lasting purpose, is genuine and moving.

The story is complete in itself. It has a beginning, a middle and an end; and it is the greatest single artistic triumph of Chaucer's career. To this extent at any rate, we can profitably compare it with *III Filostrato.*

Matthew Arnold once observed, in a phrase which has become famous, that Chaucer lacked "high seriousness". What exactly he meant by this is not clear; perhaps no more than that Chaucer is not Dante. But one may legitimately wonder for the artless ease with which Chaucer tells his story. The poem goes deep. Much of poignancy of Book V, for example, is at times almost unbearable.

There are few scenes in medieval literature more touching than the picture of true love drawn in Book III. There are few passages of such sustained lyrical quality as the "Trojan lay" sung by Antigone in Book II. The, whole poem is full of surprises, but it yields up its beauties slowly, and they are best appreciated as they rise from time to time above the orderly and sustained march of the story.

Troilus and Criseyde is still the finest narrative poem in English and in the broadcasts, or Mr. Neville Coghill's modernized version we have been given the opportunity of observing that the years have but deepened and intensified the quality of its unique appeal. Moody has beautifully summed up the artistic qualities of this poem in his book, *A History of English Literature* : "The growth of the love passion in Cressida's heart is traced through its gradual stages with a subtlety entirely new in English poetry. The action, dialogue and setting

of the poem are all created with the magic realism of the master of narrative art. Though the scene is ancient Troy, though the manners and customs are those of medieval knights and ladies, though the texture of the whole is stiffy brocaded with the conventions of courtly love, we see in many passages to be looking at a modern play or reading from a modern novel, so intimate and actual does it appear."

3. The English Period

Having served his apprenticeship first as a translator and then as an adapter and imitator, Chaucer appears to us in his last period as a great original poet. He has learnt almost to prefection the arts of description, narrative and characterisation. Further, he is sure enough of himself to indulge his humour and personality without which no writer, perhaps, is supremely great. In addition, after long practice, the technique of his versification is that of a fine craftsman.

Moreover, there was influence of the new national life on Chaucer. While Chaucer was growing up, England had been growing conscious of herself. Lovett and Moody have remarked in their book, *A History of English Literature* :

"Yet the ambition to crown his life with some monumental work remained. The drift of his genius, as he grew older, was more and more towards the imaginative presentation of real life. He had a wide experience of men of many ranks and conditions, and he had been storing up for years, with his keenly observant eyes, the materials for a literary presentation of contemporary society upon a great scale." The struggle with France had unified the people at last into a homogeneous body, no longer Norman and saxon, but English; and the brilliance of Edward III's early reign has given to this new people their first intoxicating draught of national pride. The growing power, of a Parliament tended to foster the feeling of solidarity and self-consciousness in the nation. As a member of Parliament, as a government officer, as an intimate member of the court, Chaucer felt these influences to the full. It must have seemed more and more important to him that the crowning work of his life should in some way represent the brilliant spectacle and complex culture of the actual society in which he moved.

The Canterbury Tales : This period includes his remarkable work, *The Canterbury Tales*. This work indicates that Chaucer was no longer under literary servitude. He achieved literary independence and imitative methods. In this poem he truly represented the comedy of life in all its forms.

General "Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales : *The Canterbury Tales* can be divided into two portions which are, however, skilfully mixed up and incorporated. The first being the general "Prologue" which describes

the various members of the troop, who undertook this pilgrimage. Secondly, this work consists of the tales by the members of the troop. The pilgrims are persons of all ranks and classes of society and in the inimitable description of their manner, person, dress, horses etc. with which the poet has introduced them, we behold a vast and minute portrait gallery of the social state of England in the fourteenth century. They are (1) a Knight; (2) a Squire; (3) a Yeoman, or military retainer of the class of the free peasants, who in the quality of the archer was bound to accompany his feudal lord to war; (4) A Prioress, lady of rank, superior of a nunnery ; (5, 6, 7, 8) A Nun and three priests in attendance upon this lady; (9) A Monk, a person represented as handsomely dressed and equipped and passionately fond of hunting and good cheer; (10) A Friar, or Mendicant Monk; (11) A Merchant; (12) A Clerk or Student of the University of Oxford; (13) A Sergeant of the law; (14) A Franklin or rich gentleman; (15, 16, 17, 18, 19) Five wealthy burgesses, the Haberdasher or dealer in silk and cloth. Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer and Tapisser, or maker of carpets and hangings; (20) A Cook, or rather what in old French is called a Rotissour, i.e., the keeper of a cooks shop; (21) A Shipman, the master of a trading vessel; (22) Doctor of Physic; (23) Wife of Bath, rich cloth manufacturer; (24) Parson, or secular parish priest; (25) A Ploughman, the brother of the preceding personage ; (26) Miller : A Manciple, or steward of lawyer's host or inn of court; (27, 28) Reeve, Bailiff or attendant of the estates of some wealthy landowner ; (29) Summoner ; an officer in the then formidable ecclesiastical courts, whose duty was to summon or cite before the spiritual tribunal those who had offended against the canon of laws; (30) Pardoner, or vendor of the indulgences from Rome. To these thirty persons must be added Chaucer or the narrator himself, and the Host of the Tabbard, making in all thirty-two.

The "Prologue" gives us the background of the action and movements of the pilgrims who make up the company. All these pilgrims represent the whole of English society of the fourteenth century. The Knight is a gentleman of the old school, the history of his life is that of one spent in fighting against the moors in Spain, the heathens in Prussia, and in many other expeditions. The Squire, his son, represents another kind of chivalry, the more luxurious and less idealist temper of the age of the great French War. The Yeoman, their servant, is a forester with pride in his bow and arrows. Next in the description comes the Prioress Madame Eglentyne, with a Nun and three Priests, then a Monk, The Prioress and the Monk are of the same rank, apparently, as the Knight and Squire, gentlelfolk living in religion; but not forgetting the graces of worldly society. The friar is of different cast and more at home in taverns and cottages than in "Bowar and half ". The Merchant (in trade with the Low Countries) is not especially interesting of Chaucer. The Clerk of Oxford has more of his sympathy, a

poor scholar devoted to learning. He is simple-minded and unselfish. The man of Law comes next, a Sergeant.

No where so bisy a man as the Sergeant. and yet seemed busier than he was.

The Franklin is described with great gusto. He is a country gentleman and member of Parliament, who is fond of good living.

It Snewed in his house of mete and drink.

Some members of City Companies, a Haberdasher, a Carpenter, a Weaver, A Dyer and a Tapisser are described together in general terms. They are undistinguished. The cook is more interesting. The Shipman is one of the best of all the portraits.

"With many a tempest had his beard been shake."

He was captain of the "Maudelayne", of Dartmouth, and he knew all the harbours "from Gothlande to the Cape of Finisteres". The Doctor of Physic, like some other of the more respectable pilgrims is rather indefinite. The Nife of Bath, besides, has portrait in the "Prologue", is allowed to describe herself. Later in a "Prologue" of her own, the Parson's character is Chaucer's ideal of a good priest. Of the Ploughman, his brother, there is a companion portrait, the honest workman. The Reeve, the Miller, the Manciple, the Summoner with the Pardoner, make up the number of the Pilgrims found by Chaucer at the Tabbard in Southwark. These latter personages are not carelessly passed over. They are the less gentle part of the company, but they are not all alike. The Pardoner like the wife of Bath, has an opportunity of telling all about himself before he begins his tale.

The Host Harry Baily : Last person among these personages is the host, Harry Baily, who is the moving figure. He is the dynamic personality who controls the whims and idiosyncrasies of the pilgrims. He would act as escort and general master of the ceremonies. He is himself a jovial comfortable- looking man, full of fun and good fellowship impatient at the sight of dismal faces, and a born entertainer. He made an excellent suggestion that each of the company should engage to tell four tales on the journey, two on the way up and two on the way back for the amusement and edification of the rest. The teller of the best stories was then to be rewarded by a supper to the cost of which all the pilgrims should contribute. The host was shrewd enough to stipulate that the feast should be given at his inn. In this way the tedium of the journey was enlivened by a series of tales. Lowes has rightly observed, "that in the person of host, Chaucer, the poet, created his Chorus." In other words, his comments are useful. They reveal the characteristics of his pilgrims. In reality, Chaucer, has shown us the pilgrims not only through his own and through each other's eyes but also through the eyes of Harry Baily. Being

an experienced inn-keeper, he could easily detect the traits of the pilgrims.

The Canterbury pilgrims are described so realistically that scholarship is at present searching fourteenth century England, rather than the books which the poet is known to have read for the originals of the portraits in the "Prologue". Harry Baily the host of the Tabbard is known to have been an actual person who sat in Parliament as representative of the borough of Southwark, in 1376 and 1378; and "Roger Ware of London" and "Roger Knight of Ware" appear in document of 1377 and 1384-85 in each case identified as "Cook". Professor Manly published his book under the title *Some New Light on Chaucer* in which he exhibits the results of treating "Chaucer as one would a modern writer, of believing that behind his most vital and successful sketches lay the observation of living men and women, of assuming that some of least of the definite statements made about them might be true and then searching the records of his time to discover if by chance one could find answering accurately or newly so to the descriptions he gave of them. His researches have certainly discovered much material which illuminates the descriptions of the pilgrims and adds greatly to one's enjoyment in reading the "Prologue". But his results are speculative. Anyhow, Chaucer painted the picture of the society of the fourteenth century realistically and graphically. In this respect Legouis had remarked, "He is truly the social chronicler of England at the end of the fourteenth century ..... What he has given is a direct transcription of daily life taken in the very act, as it were, and in its most familiar aspects. Chaucer's work is the most precious document for whoever wishes to evoke a picture of life as it then was."

To sum up, The 'Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales* has been recognised by critics of all schools, in spite of all the changes of taste and fashion since it has been written, as a piece of writing completely successful in all its aims. It is not Chaucer's greatest work, but it is the most perfect.

The Sources of the Canterbury Tales : Writing of *Tales* was quite popular in Chaucer's day. Tales from other countries also drifted into England. Chaucer got this idea and wrote this unique poem. Boccaccio had used a somewhat analogous idea in *The Decameron*, a collection of a hundred stories told by ten people of the gentle class who have retired within a place to escape the plague. It is unlikely that Chaucer knew the *Decameron*, since if he had known it, he would certainly have made use of it, In any case Chaucer's plan admits of greater discrepancies among the pilgrims, greater variety in the stories they can appropriately tell, and greater opportunity for incidental adventure. A closer analogy is found in the Novelle of Giovanni, Sercambi, a leader among the pilgrims, but the stories are all told by the author. It is unlikely that Chaucer was not

acquainted with this collection. At present we can best believe that Chaucer's plan for the *Canterbury Tales* was a happy idea of his own.

The Unfinished Character of the Work : The original plan was to relate120 stories and have them told by a group of pilgrims, thirty in number, journeying from London to Canterbury and back. The plan laid down in the "General Prologue" was only partially carried out. There are but twenty-four tales, and of these, two are interrupted before the end and two break off shortly after they get under way.

Chaucerian scholars have arranged the tales of *Canterbury Tales* within ten groups. There is no link within these groups. But these tales are connected within a group, which is done with the help of "Links". Links are short pieces of narrative which are useful to enfold the various characteristics of the pilgrims who relate the stories. Referring to the importance of the links, H.S. Bennet has stated, "Nowhere is this more apparent than in the next as the Host, or an incensed hearer, makes his comment on what has gone before and hastens to introduce his own subject. A man's character is made clear in his interjections or his demands to tell next tale and the docile submission of some is well contrasted with the over-bearing boisterousness of other."

These tales have been grouped as follows:

First Day	-	Group A 'Prologue', Knight's Tale, link Miller's Tale link. Reeve's Tale, link cook Tales (unfinished).
Second Day	-	Group B Man of law head link, Man of Law's Tale, Man of Laws end-link.
Third Day	-	Group C Doctor's Tale, link Pardoner's Tale.
Fourth Day	-	Group D Wife of Bath's Tales, link Friar's Tale, Link, Summoner's Tale.
		Group E Clerk's head link, Clerk's Tale, Link, Merchant's Tale.
Fifth Day	-	Group F Squire's head Link, Squire's Tale, Franklin's Tale.
		Group G Second : Nun's Tale, Link, Connon's Yeoman's Tale.
		Group H Manciple's head link, Manciple's Tale. Group I Parson's head link, Parson's Tale.

1.1.4 The Tales

The tales themselves are of an astonishing variety. Viewed merely as a collection of separate pieces for *Canterbury Tales* in its extent and variety offers a remarkable anthology of medieval literature. The country romance is

represented well enough by the Knight's Tale. The Knight begins with chivalrous romance connected with the cycle dealing with the history of Thebes, telling the story of two friends in love with the same lady. The Prioress tells a pathetic tale of the murder of a little choirboy who sang prioress, the Virgin : The Monk pours forth a series of examples illustrating the fall of men of great estates, until the host calls a halt to the dreary monotony; the swindling Pardoner shows how he illustrates his sermon on the love of money by the impressive tale of Death and the three gamblers, the Wife of Bath, after a long introductory discussion of matrimony tells a story elsewhere connected with the Arthurian cycle, to show that women most desire in their own way. This Clerk of Oxford answers with the story already told by Boccacco in Italian and Petrarch in Latin, of the patient Griselda, wife who obeyed her husband in all things. Thus, though some of the tales had been written independently before the whole work was planned most of them keep before us vividly the drama of the pilgrims ride. Nearly all the kinds of medieval narrative are represented here, and in nearly all Chaucer surpasses his predecessors. Romance and narrative and saint's legend, beast fable, and sermon and satire, all are here.

Brief outlines of these Tales are give below :

1. **The Knight's Tale:** It is an abridged version of the Tesside of Boccaccio, the story of the love of Palamon and Arcite, Prisoners, of Thesus, King of Athens' love for Emilia, sister of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, whom Thesus had married. The rivals compete for her in a tournament. Palamon is defeated, but Arcite, the favourite of Mars at the moment of his triumph is thrown and injured by his horse through the interposition of Venus and Saturn, dies, and Palamon and Emila, after prolonged mourning for Arcite unite.

2. **The Miller's Tale:** It is ribald story of the deception first of husband (a carpenter) through the prediction of a second flood, and secondly of a lover who expects to kiss the lady's lip and avenges himself for his disappointment, with a hot coulter.

3. **The Reeve's Tale :** It is connected with the French fabliau, *De Gombertetise duex cers and the Decamerone.* It is an indecent story of two clerks who are robbed by a miller of part of their meal, and revenge themselves on the Miller's wife and daughter. (The Reeve, who had been a Carpenter, thus retorts upon the Miller).

4. **The Cook's Tale:** It is imperfect and omitted in some manuscripts.

5. **The Man of Law's Tale:** It is related to a story in Gower's *Confessio Amantis.* It is the story of Constances, the daughter of a Christian emperor married to Solden on condition that he shall become a

Christian, and by the device of the Solden's mother cast adrift on the sea. Her subsequent misfortunes are very similar to those told in the verse romance, *Fmare.*

6. **The Wife of Bath's Tale:** It is preceded by a long prologue, in which Chaucer places in her mouth a condemnation of celibacy in the form of an account of her life with her five successive husbands. The Tale is like Gower's story of Florence in *Confessio Amantis.* But it is transferred to the court of king Arthur. It relates how a knight who is required, in order to avoid execution, to answer correctly within twelve months the question, what do women love most. He is told the right answer 'sovereignty', by an old witch on condition that he marries her. He reluctantly complies and finds the witch restored to youth and beauty.

7. **The Friar's Tale:** It tells how a Summoner meets the devil dressed as a bailiff who confides in him his methods in dealing with men. The Summoner attempts to extort a gift from a widow who commends him to the devil. The devil thereupon hails him off to hell.

8. **The Summoner's Tale:** In retaliation, he relates how the manoeuvers of a greedy and hypocritical friar by a sick bed were unsavourly defeated.

9. **The Clerk's Tale:** It tells how the Marquis of Saluces married humble Griselda, and of her virtues and patience under trials.

10. **The Merchant's Tale:** It is of an old man and his young wife. The old man becomes blind; the wife and her lover take advantage of this in a peer tree. Pluto suddenly restores the husband's sight: but Proserpine enables the wife to outwit him. The precise source of the story has not been traced.

11. **The Squire's Tale:** It is a Cambuscon, the king of Tartary, to whom on his birthday an envoy from the kind of Arabia brings magic gifts, including a ring for the king's daughter Canace, which enables her to understand the language of birds. A female falcon tells Canace the story of her own desertion by a tercelet. The poet promises the continuation of the tale but it is incomplete. The origin of the tale is unknown.

12. **The Franklin's Tale:** It is of a woman, Dorigen, wife of Arveragus, who, to escape the assiduity of her lover, the squire, Aurelius makes her consent to depend upon an impossible condition, that all the rocks on the coast of the Brittany be removed. When this condition is realised by the aid of a magician, the lover from a generous remorse releases her from her promise. Chaucer states that the tale is taken from British Law, but this is lost. Similar stories are found in Boccaccio's *Decameron.*

13. **The Second Nun's Tale:** It is in rhyme-royal. It is perhaps

translated from the life of St. Cecilia in the Golden Legend, *Jacobus a Voragine.* It describes the miracles and martyrdom of the noble Roman maiden Cecilia and her husband Valetian.

14. **The Canon's Yeoman's Tale:** It is an exposure of the follies and rogueries of the Alchemists.

15. **The Doctor's Tale:** It is of the death of Virginia by her own wish at her father's hands, to save her from the designs of the wicked judge Apius, who has conspired to take possession of her. Chaucer quotes Livy as the source, but has followed fairly closely to the version of the story in the *Roman de la Rose.*

16. **The Pardoner's Tale:** It has an analogue in an Italian miscellany known as the *Canto Novelle Antiche.* The Pardoner discourses on the evils of gluttony and drunkenness, gambling and swearing. This theme is illustrated by death which has killed one of their comrades. An old man tells them they will find him under a certain tree. There they discover a heap of gold. Each designs to get sole possession of the treasure, but they only succeed in killing one another.

17. **The Shipman's Tale:** There is a similar story in the *Decameron.* The wife of a niggardly merchant asks the loan of a hundred francs from a priest to buy finery. The priest borrows the sum from the merchant and hands it to the wife, and the wife grants him her favours. On the merchant's return from a journey the priest tells him he has repaid the sum to the wife, who cannot deny receiving it.

18. **The Prioress's Tale:** The source of this is unknown. It is the legend of a widow's child murdered by Jews because he sings 'O alma Redemptoris when passing through the Ghetto at Lincoln on his way to school. He miraculously continues his song after his throat is cut and the body in consequence discovered. This tale is in rhyme royal.

19. Chaucer's own contribution follows in the form of the Tale of Sir Thopas, in which the style ridicules the romances of Knights errant by contemporary rhymes. It contains phrases from Isumers and refers to Sir Bev as Sir Guy. It is soon interrupted, and Chaucer then gives the Tale of Melibeus, a prose translation of a French romance, a moral tale of virtues. It is a long tedious disputation between Melibeus and his wife Prudence on the judicious method of dealing with enemies who have done them grievous injuries.

20. **The Monk's Tale:** It is composed of a number of tragedies of persons fallen from high estate, taken from different sources and arranged on the model of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustraim.* The tale is written in eight lined stanzas.

21. **The Nun's Priest's Tale:** It is perhaps developed from one of the episodes in the French story of Reynard the Fox. It tells of a fox that beguiled a cook by praising his father's singing and was beguiled in turn to let the cook escape.

22. **The Manciple's Tale:** It is the fable of the crow, which had been treated by many authors from Ovid onwards. A certain Phebus has a crow that is white and can counterfeit any man's speech. It thus reveals to Phebus his wife's infidelity. Phebus in a fury kills his wife, and then, in remorse, plucks out the crow's white feathers, deprives it of its speech, and throws it out unto the devil and that is why crows are now black.

23. **The Parson's Tale:** It is dissertation in prose on penitence, the character of each kind of sin, and the appropriate remedy. It is probably the raw material on which Chaucer proposed to work rather than a finished tale.

Political Qualities of The Canterbury Tales :

E.W. Edmunds has beautifully summed up the poetical qualities of *The Canterbury Tales* in these words : "Nevertheless, what we have is a veritable collection of poetry astonishing in its variety, its abundance, its unfailing resource. The pilgrims themselves are a microcosm of medieval society, and their tales are with equal justice regarded as a microcosm of medieval literature. Except the lyric, in which Chaucer did not excel, every form of literature current in his day is represented by a master piece, romance, legend, fable, moral epilogue, life of saints, homely- all are there in permanent guise. It is this successful treatment of such a varied programme of subject that naturally impresses us first on a survey of the tales. Few poets in literature have so successfully satisfied at once the court and the clister, the study and the market place; like a modern novelist, Chaucer appeals alike to the king on his throne and to the man in the street. A little education is now necessary to follow his language and a little more to keep up with his learning. But all that is essential in these tales can be appreciated by anyone who has read in that book of human nature which is always open around us. They have the many colours, the varied movement, the constant changefulness of life itself.

Next to this truthfulness, the most prevalent flavour of the *Canterbury Tales* is the humour. This reveals itself at almost every turn. So omnipresent is it, that it may fairly be described as the medium in which Chaucer's mind naturally worked. It is woven into every part of the work. In the portraits of the pilgrims, in the whole conception of some of the stories, it is obvious to the meanest intelligence. It is less obvious but even characteristic. In the thousand slight touches it denotes at once an exquisite faculty of observation and an exquisite literary skill. It is as fine and subtle as Jane Austen's work but less ironical; it is not surpassed by

Shakespeare's genius, except in those regions of thought and feeling where *Hamlet* was conceived, regions which Chaucer did not attempt to explore. It is true that propriety did not keep too severe a rein upon Chaucer's humour; it is also true that when he was most coarse, his humour remained genuine; but even when this element has been wholly subtracted from his work the humour survives as clear and all pervading as ever. The pathos which invariably resides with true humour is pure and unforced. Both tears and laughter are serenely human. The pity and the fun are not weaknesses; they are the ready and spontaneous sympathies of an ordinary mortal, or one who has erred and endured like ourselves.

1.1.5 Self Check Exercise

1 Discuss Chaucer as a social chronicler of his age.

2 Chaucer is hailed as father of modern english language. Discuss.

1.1.6 Summary

In this unit, we had a brief introduction to the life and works of Geoffrey Chaucer who was a pioneer in more than one respect. He has been hailed as the first metrical artist, the fast relist, the first one man entertainment industry, the first great character painter and the first maker of modern as the father of English language as he gave recognition to English Language.

1.1.7 Short Questions

1 In what ways is Chaucer's English different from others?

2 What are three interesting facts about Chaucer?

1.1.8 Long Questions

1 Why is Chaucer called the Morning Star of Renaissance?

2 Why is Chaucer called the father of English poetry?

1.7 Suggested Readings

- *Chaucer and His Poetry* : G.L. Kittredge.
- *A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* : Muriel Bowden.
- *Chaucer and His World* : E.E. Halliday.
- *Chaucer* (Literature in Perspective) : M.W. Grose.
- *History of English Literature,* Legouis and Cazamian.
- *Chaucer* : *The Canterbury Tales* (Casebook Series), ed., J.J. Anderson
- *Medieval English Literature,* W.P. Ker.

M.A. (English) Part-I **COURSE-I**

SEMESTER-I **INTRODUCTION TO POETRY : MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE**

LESSON NO. 1.2 **AUTHOR : DR. SANT SINGH BAL**

Converted into SLM by Ms. Paramjeet Kaur
Last updated October, 2023

"PROLOGUE" TO THE CANTERBURY TALES

STRUCTURE

1.2.1 Objectives

- To familiarizing students with the most important work by Geoffrey Chaucer-The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.
- To understand the historical significance of the age Chaucer lived in.
- To understand the nature of medieval poetry.

1.2.2 Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer is known as the father of modern English language. His literary career is divided in three periods i.e. the period of French influence, the period of Italian influence and lastly the period of English influence. Chaucer is known for his art of characterization and humour. He is also known as the social chronicler of his age or contemporary England in the fourteenth century.

1.2.3 A Brief Summary

"General Prologue" to The Canterbury Tales contains an account of the most famous journey in English Literature made by a band of pilgrims to the shrine of St. Thomas a Becket at Canterbury. It is spring time :

When that April with his shoures soote.
The droughte of March hath perced to the roote

And the birds are singing and earth is wearing green robes once more, "It is the springtime of English Literature also", as M. W. Grose has rightly pointed out. And Grose is right, for Chaucer came to be regarded by Spenser two centuries later, in the time of Shakespeare, as "that

renowned poet Well of English undefiled." Chaucer's contemporaries and immediate successors praised him not only for technical skill, but as a man of vast learning who first beautified the English language and enhanced its reputation.

Chaucer's most famous poem *The Canterbury Tales* opens with "General Prologue", a piece consisting of 858 lines of heroic couplets. In "The Prologue", the poet tells us in great detail about the journey to Canterbury from the London inn of Tabbard, the gathering of twenty-nine pilgrims at an inn and object of their journey', to St. Becket's Cathedral at Canterbury. Then the poet introduces various pilgrims one by one and refers to the host's suggestions that on their way to Canterbury the pilgrims should entertain themselves by narrating tales during the ride to and from Canterbury. The host also offers to entertain the best story-teller and accompany the pilgrims to Canterbury. All the pilgrims spend the night at the Tabbard inn and the next morning, they get ready for the first phase of the journey. After, the host's injunction upon the company for perfect obedience to his commands, lots are drawn for deciding as to who should narrate the first tale. We learn that the Knight would be the first narrator.

The most remarkable feature of "The Prologue" is that it is a sort of film that transports us to medieval times. The portraits of different pilgrims highlight Chaucer's art of characterisation and his sense of his contemporary society. The description of the externals of the pilgrims and the insightful and penetrating depiction of the condition of their minds and imagination makes Chaucer's account not only poetically authentic, but also aesthetically satisfying. It may be noted that the poet deliberately keeps several of the pilgrims in the background and he concentrates his attention on some of the more picturesque and representative ones. This device helps the poet to make his observations about the pilgrims interesting so that the reader does not feel bored. The host's occasional remarks also make the descriptions natural and spontaneous. In fact, "The Prologue" throughout bears the hallmarks of Chaucer as a poet---his simplicity and spontaneity, his brevity and effortless ease.

It is not possible to pin-point the exact date of composition of *The Canterbury Tales.* We can only say that the compositions of so long and ambitious a poem must have been spread over a long period of time. As pointed out by Kittredge and Lawrence, "The Prologue must have been composed around the year 1387." Lawrence says, "Chaucer first composed the "General prologue" and then proceeded in order with the narrative of the journey."

The poet begins with the description of the Knight, a brave and excellent man distinguished for his great qualities and outstanding achievements. His love of chivalry, truth, honour and freedom and his courage in fighting made him a unique figure both in the Christian and Heathen countries. The Knight was accompanied by his son, a young Squire, a gay aspirant for kinghthood.

He was a young man of twenty, with curly hair, well-proportioned and healthy body. He had taken an active part in military adventures. Besides his son, the Kinght also had with him a Yeoman who carried a bundle of arrows plumed with peacock feathers under his belt. His hair was closely cropped and he knew almost everything about wood craft. He wore on his breast a bright silver brooch engraved with the image of St. Christopher.

In the company of these pilgrims there was also a Nun. She abided by the doctrines of St. Eligius. But at the same time, she was full of fun and humour although she was always dignified in her manners. She was extremely kind to animals and she fed her pet dogs with roasted meat, milk and bread. This nun had another prioress with her who was her chaplain and also three priests. Whenever any of her pet dogs died, she wept bitterly. The Monk comes next in the list of Chaucer's pilgrims. He looked after the Church estates and was fond of hunting. He was a good rider and had a number of good horses in his stable. When he rode, people could hear clearly the sound of the bells worn on the bridle reins of his horse. This man did not care to follow the rules and laws enjoined upon the monks of Benedictine order, or those advocated by St. Mauras, nor did he even study the holy books. The Monk loved all the things prohibited by religion. There was a gay Friar and among the friars of the four different orders none could talk so sweetly as he. Besides solemnizing the marriage of several young women at his own cost, the Friar had the privilege to hear the confession of the sinners. He argued with the people that instead of weeping and praying, they should make rich gifts of money to the poor friars. This would surely improve the spiritual health of the community. His voice was musical and in singing popular songs he had no rival. He knew the taverns in every town and many a barmaid in inns. In other words, the friar was least religious and wasted his time in pursuit of worldly pleasures. In fact, he was as wanton and merry as a puppy, though he appeared as much a man of rank as a pope.

The Merchant with his folk, represents the trading classes of the time; and between Orwelle and Middleburg, he knew how to exchange the French coins for those of England on profit. Despite his efficiency in commerical matters, the Merchant was every inch in debt although the world at large did not know this fact. After this, the poet introduces us to the Oxford Clerk, a lean and thin scholar interested in the study of philosophy and living on whatever his friends gave him, because as yet he had neither started receiving any allowance from the Church, nor earning money on his own.

The Sergeant of the Law was a worldly-wise, and prudent man who had often attended the conferences of eminent lawyers. He has amassed a good deal of wealth and purchased property. He was an expert in legal matters, knew several legal cases by heart. He was given to pleasure and therefore, the poet regards him as the true disciple of Epicurus, and ancient Greek philosopher who preached the idea that perfect felicity and

ease in life could be achieved through the pursuit of pleasure. The Franklin with a white beard was the companion of the Sergeant of law. The Franklin loved to eat pieces of bread soaked in wine and in his village, he was as hospitable as St. Jullian. On several occasions, he was appointed the knight of the Squire. He had also been a sheriff and an auditor.

Besides these worthies, there was a group of five guildsmen, a carpenter, a weaver, a dyer and an upholster. They had a cook with them, who was expert in cooking different varieties of food. Moreover, there was a Doctor of Medicine, who had, as deep a knowledge of astrology as of surgery and medicine. By casting horoscopes, he could calculate the right time for making talismans for his patients. He knew the cause of every illness and could cureit with ease and assurance.

The worthy woman from the neighbourhood of Bath was such a skilful wool weaver that she surpassed the Flemish weavers of Ypres and Ghent.

Her face was bold, red and fair and she had five marriages in the Church, in addition to Galicia where stood the shrine of St. James. In fact, she was widely travelled. In appearance, her teeth were like those of a goat and this made her lascivious. Chaucer humorously observes that the wife of Bath had mastered Ovid's remedies of love and, therefore, she knew the rules of love making very well.

From the fun-loving and romantic wife of Bath, the poet takes us to the parish Parson, a poor man, but deeply religious. Well-versed in theology, he preached the Christian gospels in their time spirit. He demonstrated from his personal example that adversity was an essential part of religious experience. No doubt, his parish covered a wide area but he always visited his parishioners whom he regarded as his flock. It was his effort to lead men to the holy path by setting before them a noble example of his own pure and honest life. He was accompanied by his brother, the Ploughman, an honestworker, with deep faith in God. Chaucer then tells us that along with those already described, there was another group of pilgrims consisting of Reeve, a Miller, a Summoner, a Pardoner, a Manciple and the narrator himself. While the Miller was a strong and brave man with his beard as red as that of a fox. Along with the Summoner, there was his friend, Pardoner. His voice was as clear and loud as that of a goat, and an interesting feature of his personality was that he had no beard and the poet believes that he was a eunuch. The Manciple was as careful and wise man and any man would learn from his example the art of buying provisions from the market. He had more than thirty masters who were all clever experts in law and about a dozen of them were capable of becoming stewards of land and rent in the estate of any lord of England to help its owner lead a happy and honourable life.

This, in brief, is the summary of "The Prologue". The different pilgrims introduced by Chaucer here represent classes of England of Chaucer's day and from their characters we form a fairly good impression of the social and

religious conditions of those times.

1.2.2 Chaucer---The Evening Star of the Medieval Age and the Morning Star of the Renaissance

The morning star of song, who made His Music heard below:

Dan Chaucer, The First Warbler, whose sweet breath Preluded those melodious bursts that fill The spacious times of great Elizabeth With sounds that echo still.

Thus sings Tennyson in praise of Chaucer. To quote Morris H. Neeleman: "From his own age to this, Chaucer has been a moving force." J.R. Lowell has described him as being the most natural of the great English poets, who "keeps his feeling free and unspoiled by his knowledge of books and affairs." Prof. Rutherford is of the opinion that what Chaucer thought five centuries ago a modern poet would think tomorrow, and that he is supposed to be the pioneer of real and genuine types of English poetry who was followed by others.

The Age of Chaucer is like a high table-land to which we ascend as by a long and gradual slope through the literature of the previous period and from which we descend again somewhat abruptly to the literature of the period that follows. Chaucer himself rises from the midst of this table and like a single lonely peak is matched and almost unapproached. This is not to suggest that the age is separated by any gulf from what goes before and after. The literary movement is continuous.

Chaucer is the first great landmark in English literature. His position is singular and unique. With him the old period closes; and with him; the great literature of modern England, in a sense, begins. From his lofty height he is heralder of the dawn though it is still many hours to the full break of day, Chaucer, like Dante, is a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. If the modern world had begun to assert itself, the medieval world had by no means passed away; side by side, they stood, the old and the new. Chaucer represents both of them. He is romantic, he is realistic. He is a modern among the medievals and a medieval among the moderns. In the words of Prof. Rutherford "Chaucer is the central figure of that earlier Renaissnace, which could not maintain itself in England, because the time was not yet ripe." He is a child of light, not merely of twilight. His contemporaries and immediate successors recognized and admired his genius but it was not given to them to keep aloof the torch he had kindled, nor were the people ready to nurse the flame. It was reserved for the great Elizabethans to fan the latent genius of English Poetry of flame.

Chaucer is the supreme poet of the Middle Ages. He is an organic part of the literary development of the whole Middle English period. In him the literary tendencies, the two guiding impulses of English literatures, romance and religion of the Middle Ages culminate to find their supreme expression. The romantic literature of Middle Ages was a necessary preparation for Chaucer's infinitely greater achievements in the field of romantic poetry. He also has his association with the religious sentiments of the Middle Ages. He was not distinctly a religious poet, but he was a man of religious nature and sympathies. He directs his gentle satire against the religious abuses of the day. He draws an immortal picture of the good Parish priest; he knows how to tell a religious story with full appreciation of the medieval sentiment. He gathers up the past and shines it for all time in his great verse. No other English poet has preserved for us so much of the life and sentiment of the Middle Ages. Chaucer has been bracketed with Dante and Petrarch in what has been called "The Triumvirate of the Medieval Poets."

Chaucer is also modern. He is the "Evening Star of the Medieval day and the Morning Star of the Renaissance. Legouis says that Chaucer "really opened up a new literary field." He stands on the threshold of the New Age no doubt but still hedged in a backward gazing world. The medieval mind has its gaze fixed primarily on the spiritual and the abstract, that of Renaissance on the sensuous and the concrete. Dante represents the former types, Shakespeare the latter. The medieval tends towards communism, the Renaissance towards individualism. To study medieval literature is like visiting a dusty museum. Its spirit is essentially unprogressive. It is in sharp and happy contrast to this spirit of medieval literature. His work is like an unexpectedly lively inn in a benighted wilderness.

The leaders of the Renaissance movement were two celebrated Italian writers Petrarch (1304-74) and Boccaccio (1313-75) and it was through their works that the influence of humanism passed into England. The Renaissance spirit is still the spirit of our times. As Chaucer is the last of the medievals, he is the first of the moderns. He is the first humanist, the first great poet of England, "With him", said Matthew Arnold, "is born out real poetry." Dryden describes him as "the father of English Poetry." English literature remained down in Chaucer's time, in an infantile state, crude and imperfect. Chaucer is the chorus leader of English poetry. Old English alliterative verse is easily slighted as barbarian when read by the side of Chaucer's artistic diction.

Langland was endeavouring to revive the ashes of the burnt-out fire, while Chaucer was flowering into a language. He is the first poet of English language. The East Midland Dialect, the King's English, grew into the language of literature, the standard English. He was the first great master who came like a bright morning in an early spring.' In an age when English poetry needed invigoration, he gave it new life and showed it fresh paths. He compelled the English that he spoke to sing and lent it a charm. He made poetry English; he made English poetry. He is representative poet (of the England of the fourteenth century, but he is also one of England's representative poets) of all times. He was responsive to the Time-spirit, but he was not limited by it. While he was true to the life of his times, he was also true to those central elements in human nature that belong to all times.He is modern as Homer is modern, in his sympathetic touching of the fundamental chords of human nature.

The influence of Chaucer upon English Poetry of all dialects during his age and after his death, as well, is almost unparalleled in literature. To the development of English as the means and matter of creative art, he rendered true service. With inevitable changes it is still Chaucer's dialect that we speak today.He had founded alike English language and literature. It was due to the universal spirit introduced by Chaucer that English Poetry became for the first time, European.Matthew Arnold says that Chaucer "will be read, as time goes on, far more generally then he is read now." Again, to quote Dryden: "he is a perpetual fountain of good sense." Chaucer's capacity for prose and verse, for satire and fun, for tales, tragic, comic or pathetic enables him to render to the language of his country most the same service that Dante rendered to that of Italy.

In the Middle English Literature, there is no literary criticism. But it was Chaucer who maintained that spirit that Chaucer had the critical spirit, is clear from many passages in his poems.Further, the remarkable administration of Chaucer himself expressed by other poets from his own time up to Gascoigne's notes on prosody indicates the presence of a critical understanding in Chaucer.

To conclude, Chaucer is really a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age. If we stand at this bridge, we are face to face with the Renaissance world: and if we move to the other end, we shall be at the gates of that world in which Chaucer lived and wrote. His *Canterbury Tales* is not only a commentary on the fourteenth century life in England, but has everything : narrative, song, characterisation, dramatic skill and

the seeds of modern novel for the modern reader. Thus we are justified in calling him "The Evening Star of the Medieval day and the Morning Star of the Renaissance."

1.2.5 Nature of Medieval Poetry

The poetry of the Medievel Times was written at the time when the English nation was emerging from the dark ages to the age of enlightenment.Though some elements associated with modernity were coming into prominence, yet essentially, the age was medievel — unscientific, chivalrous, superstitious, religious minded and backward in most respects. J.M. Munly has rightly observed in the *Cambridge History of English Literature,* "The fourteenth Century was a dark epoch in the History of England. However, the silver lining of modernity succeeded in piercing here and there the thick darkness of ignorance and superstition. The age of Chaucer was inching its way steadily and surely to the dawn of Renaissance and the Reformation which were yet a couple of centuries ahead."

The great medievel civilization had already been wounded, perhaps mortally wounded by two great griefs, the first national and the other moral. The first was the Black death which turned Christendom into a house of mourning and had dreadful result of every kind. The worst thing was that good priests became fewer and bad priests had to take the place of good ones and this event brought the whole great Christian philosophy and morality into contempt. The immediate consequence of the Black Death was the acute shortage of working hands. It gave rise to The Peasant's Revolt in 1381 during the regin of Richard II. The peasants groaning under the weight of injustice and undue official severity were led to London by the Kentish priest John Ball. Chaucer in *his Nun's Priest's Tale* refers in the following lines to Jack Straw who with Wat Tylar raised the banner of revolt.

Certes, he jackke Straw and his meyne, No made never shoutes half so shrille, What they golden any flemying kille Ask thicke day was made upon the box.

Corruption was also rampant in the Church. The greater prelates lived in a Godless and worldly way and the mendicant Friars were notorious for their greed and profilgacy. Poets like Langland and Gower freely denounced the growing corruption in the Church and through their writings sought to revive real Christianity. Chaucer was aware of the deplorable conditions prevalent in the Church and in his "Prologue" presents a naked picture of the evils of the religious world. His ironical portraits of the different Ecclesiastical Characters reveals that Chaucer is impartial and realistic and paints both sides of the picture.

The strain of didacticism and moralising characterises the medieval poetry. The moralising tone is present in *Pearl and Patience, 'Piers the*

Plowman' and *'Confessio Amantis'.* Gower as a contemporary of Chaucer pictures the condition of the Church in his "Prologue" to *Confessio Amantis* :

> Lo, thus Ye broke is cristes folde Where of the flock without guide
> Devoured is on very side.

The poets of Medieval England reflect love for allegory. Chaucer's poetry in the French and Italian periods is allegorical and so is "Langland's vision of *Piers the Plowman.*" The craze for allegory was in the air in the Medieval poetry and it continued during the next century and reached its culmination in Spenser's *Faerie Queene,* Chaucer's the *Book of Duches* (1369), an Allegory on the death of Blancho, wife of John of Gaunt and *The House of Fame* a dream medley with some classical memories but full of intricate and sometimes rambling medieval lore.

The most outstanding feature of the Middle Ages was chivalry. Chaucer's Knight is a true representative of the spirit of Medieval Chivalry which was a blend of love, religion and bravery. He has been a champion of not fewer than fifteen battles of defence of Christianity. Even the late that he tells is, like him, There is less rigidity in the position of the pause and greater freedom in the substitution of three syllable feet. Alliteration figuring only in Langland becomes simply an ornament of metre-sometimes a device of great beauty but not vital to the material scheme. Chaucer makes new experiments in versification. He employs three principal metres, the eight syllable lines also rhyming in couplets (Heroic couplets). As in the *"Prologue"* to the *Canterbury Tales* and the same line arranged in seven lines stanzas known later as rhyme royal as in *'Triolus and Criseyde'* and heroic couplet is introduced with English Verse and Chaucer invented 'rhyme royal'. In the shorter poems, he made endless material experiments and showed a mastery on intricate verse forms almost gymnastic skills. By the late fourteenth century, the Traditional ballad of the type of 'Chaucer chase' and Sir Patrick Spens and the Robindhood Ballads became popular. The material romance so popular in the Middle ages was on the wane in the fourteenth century. It was being supplanted by the Tale of Chaucer and the popular ballad.

To conclude it can be said that the fourteenth century was a period of political, social, religious and literary activity. The feeling of natural consciousness and patriotism were strengthened. Middle class sprang into ascendancy. The Medieval and the Renaissance stood side by side. The age of Chaucer witnessed a rapid growth in trade and commerce. As for the literary activities, the age of Chaucer witnessed the Rise of the English

language. A period marked by such a wonderful chain of new trends naturally gave birth to greater creative literature. The poets who made a solid contribution to medieval poetry and shaped its distinct character are Chaucer and a group of illustrious poets, including Langland and Gower. Chaucer stole the show by anticipating the modern taste and modern mind and in his poetry introduced qualities far in advance of his age.

1.2.6 Self Check Exercise

1 Discuss Geoffrey Chaucer as a social chronicler of his age.

2 Discuss University Wits.

1.2.7 Summary

The Canterbury Tales consists of 858 lines of heroic couplets. "The Prologue" tells us about the journey of twenty nine pilgrims to Canterbury. The most remarkable feature of the Prologue is that it is a portrait gallery, a sort of film that transports us to medieval times. This portrait gallery depicts Chaucer's art of characterization and his sense of contemporary society.

1.2.8 Short Questions

1 Name Chaucer's Contemporaries.

2 Define Lollardism.

1.2.9 Long Questions

1 Discuss the nature of medieval poetry.

2 Chaucer is the supreme poet of the Middle Ages. Elaborate.

1.2.10 Suggested Readings

- *Chaucer and His Poetry* : G.L. Kittredge.
- *A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* : Muriel Bowden.
- *Chaucer and His World* : E.E. Halliday.
- *Chaucer* (Literature in Perspective) : M.W. Grose.
- *History of English Literature,* Legouis and Cazamian.
- *Chaucer* : *The Canterbury Tales* (Casebook Series), ed., J.J. Anderson
- *Medieval English Literature,* W.P. Ker.

M.A. (English) Part-I **COURSE-I**

SEMESTER-I **INTRODUCTION TO POETRY : MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE**

LESSON NO. 1.3 **AUTHOR : DR. SANT SINGH BAL**

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S PROLOGUE

STRUCTURE

1.3.1 Objectives

- To aquaint the students with literary terms like characterization, wit and humour.
- To discuss Chaucer's unique and superb characterization.
- To understand how Chaucer is a social satirist of his age.

1.3.2 Introduction

This unit shall deal with Chaucer's art of characterization. We shall also discuss humour in the prologue to Canterbury Tales. Chaucer not only introduced modern rumour but also his charaters are individuals as well as types.

1.3.3 CHAUCER'S CHARACTERISATION

Chaucer's art of characterisation is unique and superb. He introduced not only modern humour in English poetry, but also opened a new road that had for its destination the hitherto inaccesible recesses of the human heart and mind. The traditional English poetry before Chaucer soared in the mysterious dreamlands of allegories and romances. But Chaucer turns out to be the first mighty poet of the human heart; and his claim to be the first great painter of character in English Literature is indisputable. He saunters gaily through life, pausing to notice every trifle as he passes. Kitteridge points out : "Next to Shakespeare, Chaucer is the greatest delineator of character in our literature."

Chaucer's figures are not puppets. His people are always vital. They never become shadowy or lifeless, they live. His characters are not abstractions, but individuals; are not parodies, but persons. Then again, they

are made to unfold and reveal themselves by a three-fold process. First, they are described with extraordinary vigour and animation in the "General Prologue". Secondly, they partly describe themselves through their own "Prologue". Thirdly, the leading feature of their characters is illustrated by the tales which they tell.

Chaucer's characters are individuals as well as types, not mere phantoms of the brain but real human beings. They are men and women with distinct personalities. As Ward puts it, and this is the end and aim of true portrait painting, the true measure of all great art. Take, for example, the Shipman who is a typical figure of the fourteenth century. Chaucer had transformed him into an individual by describing him "with many a tempest had his beard been shake". Referring to this characteristic of Chaucer, Legouis has observed:

"More general traits would have turned the picture into a forzen symbol." These men and women in the "Prologue", stop before us just long enough to enable us to form an idea of their personality.

"The Prologue" has been described as a veritable picture-gallery. It would be truer to call it a grand procession, with all the life and movement, the colour and sound that we associate with a procession. In the course of his life, Chaucer had come into contact with them all. The Knight, the Squire, the Merchant, the Sailor, the Scholar, the Doctor, the Monk, Labourers, Saints and Knaves-he knew them intimately. He knew the court; he knew the people and he painted them for us with their internal and external peculiarities. In his world we become acquainted with the medieval Englishman as he moved and lived. "The Prologue" is a masterpiece of insight, sureness of touch, fine discrimination of every character. We perceive the outward appearance as well as the inward disposition of every character. "We receive such an exact idea of the men he is describing", writes Ten Brink "that we can almost see them bodily before our eyes." The pilgrims are introduced to us with all their idiosyncracies of dress and character.

All are discriminated by the happiest, the subtlest touches. No two persons are exactly alike. The similarities are striking as the contrasts. Many go in pairs, a few stand singly. The Knight and the Squire, the Parson and the Ploughman, the Prioress and the Wife of Bath, the Monk and the Friar, the Summoner and the Pardoner are equally interesting whether as studies in comparison or studies in contrast. Some of his persons are vicious and some virtuous; some are unlearned and some learned. Even the ribaldry of low characters is different-the Reeve, the Miller and the Cook are several men and distinguished from each other as much as the Prioress and Wife of Bath.

Chaucer painted life as he saw it - "he conceals nothing, he condemns nothing and he saw it with so observant an eye that his epoch has become one of the vivid epochs of history, comparable even to the age of Cicero and the age of Shakespeare. Chaucer is most emphatically a poet of character and

manners. As a picture of men and manners of religion and morals in the England of his times, *The Canterbury Tales* stands unique. The background of the tales is keenly English and really living. It is indeed "merry England." Chaucer gives us a microcosm of English society. 'High and low meet with no class feeling in a perfect democracy travel. It is a representative assembly, a parliament of social and industrial England.' Except the very highest and the very lowest, every important phase of life is represented Chivalry, Church, professional men, Trade and Commerce, Agriculture etc. Drpone praises 'the most comprehensive nature' of Chaucer and says : 'Here is God's plenty.'

Chaucer is a liberal comedian. His genius like Shakespeare's is to depict the various types of humorous characters. In his earlier works, there are persons who are personifications, but in his *Canterburty Tales* his characters are vividly real and life like. In this connection, Oliver Elton has stated. "His is the first free and brilliant intelligence among our poet's, the first artist to show the open life of mankind upon a generous scale in a clear mirror, the first portrait painter and the first true comedian. After Shakespeare there is no such showman of the English roads and their population until we reach Fielding, with whom Chaucer has much in common.

Chaucer's art of characterization is free from personal bias. He portrays his characters objectively. In this respect, he is a kin to Shakespeare and Fielding. He leaves reforms to Wycliff and Langland, and can laugh with the Shipman who turns smuggler or with the worldly Monk whose "jingling bridle keeps others as well as himself from hearing the Church bell. In fine, Chaucer is content to picture a world in which the rain falls alike upon the just and the unjust people, and in which the latter seems to have a liberal share of the umbrellas. The reader thinks that this or that character deserves to come to bad end, but not so. Chaucer who regards them all as kindly and as impersonally as Nature herself.

Chaucer's power of vivid descriptions is at its best on account of his acute faculty of observation. He was a man of the world, mixing freely with all types of mankind; and he used his opportunities to observe the little peculiarities of human nature. He had the seeing eye, the retentive memory, the judgment of select, and the capacity to expound. Chaucer's ultimate glory is not finished craftsmanship but the power by virtue of which he creates through speech and action, living characters. In *The Canterbury Tales* the narrative of the pilgrims art is as much interesting to the poet as to the pilgrims themselves. The stories besides their interest as narratives, are important in so far as they reveal something about the story-tellers. Legouis points out that the "tales were for Chaucer a means of completing the portraits of his pilgrims. He found them in every corner of medieval literature, as diverse and unequal as he could wish." Chaucer used the tales to characterize the tellers. That is why he chose for each of them a story suited to his class and character. While Boccaccio tried to put 'heat and red blood' into a literary form usually of the driest.

Chaucer, less condensed and passionate, addressed himself more and more to the study of character. He repeats within several of his stories that effort to recapture individuality which is the glory of his "The Prologue". In fact, he points the way for Moliere and Henry Fielding. His gift of objective presentation of the world's variety and his acceptance of men and women with all their faults make Chaucer a great humanist.

To sum up, Chaucer's characters represent the motley of humanity, its good and evil, its idealism and depravity, (its saints and sinners), its glory and its shame. There is something universal about the pilgrims of Chaucer and their humanity acquires fresh dimensions with the passing of time. For example, the Pardoner and the Summoner represent the class of men which exploits others and preys upon the credulous, the superstitious laity of all times and climes. In the same way the good person acts as a true and noble messenger of God, who inspires humanity in its external pilgrimage. The presence of his angelic man among Chaucer's pilgrims reinforces our faith in the sunny aspects of life. He foreshadows such characters in English fictions as Dr. Primorse in The *Vicar of Wakefield,* and Parson Adams in Fielding's novel *Joseph Andrews.* Thus Chaucer has depicted the variety and paradoxes of human life through the characters who compose all ages and nations for they are all types no less than archetypes of humanity.

1.3.4 Chaucer's Humour

Human life is a queer mixture of joy and sorrow, and these two broad aspects of our life are reflected in comic literature and in serious or tragic literature respectively. If comedy makes us burst into laughter, tragedy wrings tears from our eyes. "Though under the apparent silvery sheens of laughter, a burning fire of pain and suffering smoulders, our sincerest laughter with some pain is fraught", as Shelley has beautifully put it. Yet there remains something like pure humour, the rain of laughter that purifies our dusty spiritual landscape and liberates us from the pressures and terrors of existence. Just what is that makes us laugh, however, though it has been the subject of much investigation, yet it is disputed and controversial. According to Aristotle, "the subject of comedy is some definite defect or ugliness which is not great enough to cause pain." His observation clearly suggests laughter is directed at some person when he is placed in some inferior position. This idea was developed by Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth century British philosopher, who remarked that "those grimaces called laughter" were the result of self- delight of "sudden glory." Hobbes's leading modern disciple , Anthony Ludovics replaces "sudden glory" with the phrase "superior adaption",but does not change Hobbes's original ideas. The famous French philosopher Henri Bergson sees laughter as a "weapon, which the life force- elan vital use to subdue and chastise social rigidities taboos and chain. There is also the incongruity theory, i.e., departure from the normal accepted and 'civilised' way of life which is the real source of laughter. Kant, Schopenhauer, and

Herbert Spencer are the most renowned names to be associated with the theory. The idea is that the perception of some kind of incongruity in human speech of behaviour, causing our expectation to be disappointed, is the source of our laughter. Freud accepts part of this theory, but at the same time suggests that the release of suppressed sexual or aggressive tendencies from the control of the 'psychic censor' is the key element in laughter. It may be pointed out that humour is essentially emotional in character while wit is intellectual. The word humour is sometimes limited to gentle and sympathetic laughter, while sometimes it is used as a satirical weapon to expose human follies, weaknesses and foibles.

Chaucer's poetry is full of genial humour. He laughs at the human follies and imperfections, but his attitude is not bitter like that of Swift. On the *contrary,* he foreshadows Shakespeare whose comedies are full of spontaneous mirth and laughter. *"The Prologue"* to the *Canterbury Tales* and *The Pardoner's* Tale are replete with light comedy. Throughout these tales, grave and gay, all the pilgrims have their turn and mingle together in our memory to make up the world that the *Canterbury Tales* present before us. In fact, Chaucer's claims to fame are based on the continuous level of excellence which he maintains in reproducing in verse this human comedy. However, he never makes the mistake of thinking of men and women in terms of angels, but it is of men and women as immensely fallible and the more human for it that he writes. In so doing, he frequently gives reign to witty, ironic comment, and is then often at his most characteristic and best. It is this strain in him which also enables him to produce Harry Bailly, wife of Bath and other characters and which also enable him to emphasize the irony of situation and character. The irronical quality which informs so much of his writing is all part of his omnipresent sense of humour. To quote H.S. Bannet, "Chaucer seldom allows any topic, however serious, to extinguish his realization that even here laughter may have its place. It is not the harsh, tortutous laughter of Swift but more akin to that of Shakespeare. The Wife of Bath and Sir John Falstaff would have understood one another. Chaucer's sense of humour enables him to relish the vulgarities of his characters, the attitudinizing of Miller and his wife; or the pretensions of the learned. He can laugh at himself when he feels he is getting too portentious, or falling into a medieval common place. His catalogues of men, places, authorities, his appeal to gods and to the learned; his detailed accounts of astronomy and alchemy all require careful scrutiny before we can be sure that Chaucer is not mocking at us and himself."

Humour is the stuff and substance of Chaucer's entire mental constitution and very essence of his art. It is for this reason that Masefield describes him as " a great Renaissance gentleman mocking the Middle Ages." There will be no exaggeration if we remark that with Chaucer, humour is a means of thinking, a habit of mind and an attitude

towards life, unconsciously formed by his interest in humanity and his tolerance of the absurdities and failings of human behaviour. It is the sunshine that gives a lively touch to his poetry. Its rustic humour has a universal appeal and cuts across the barriers of time and place, language and culture, for Chaucer deals with certain basic aspects of human nature which are ever the same, in all times and all climes. It may be noted that Chaucer belongs to the fraternity of great humourists in the British and European literature represented by such artists as Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais, Moliere, Fielding and Dickens.

Chaucer's humour is essentially English in nature and character, as pointed out by Lowell: "It is not the wit of the Frenchman. His humour is born of a strong common sense and generous sympathy and these are the qualities of the greatest English humourists like Shakespeare and Fielding. He showed the value of the comic point of view the capacity to expose the incongruity which always lies hidden in men and things or in their relations with each other." Another significant feature of Chaucer's humour is that it is many-sided and all his writings abound in all its rich variety. Humour can be used in a broad as well as limited sense. In the narrow sense, humour means gentle mirth of innocent laughter, while in the broader sense, it stands for boisterous laughter, intellectual repartees wit, gentle and delightful humour, satire. These differnt aspects of humour are beautifully reflected in *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, The Pardoner's Tale* and other works of Chaucer. E. Albert's comment on the many-sided humour of Chaucer is noteworthy, "In the literature of his time, when so few poets seemed to have any perception of the fun in life, the humour of Church is invigorating and delighful. The humour which steeps nearly all his poetry, has great variety; patronizing, as in the case of the Clerk of Oxford, broad and semi-farcical as in the wife of Bath, pointedly satirical as in the Pardoner and the Summoner, or coarse, as happens in the tales of the Miller, The Reeve and the Pardoner. It is seldom that the satirical intent is wholly lacking as it is in the case of good Parson, but except in rare cases, the satire is good-mortal. "Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is full of several varieties of humour. Half the Canterbury pilgrims as they file before a reader of "The Prologue" raise a smile. Pandarus is perhaps the greatest comic figure in English Literature before Falstaff. Chaucer's humour is part of his rich humanity, and it sometimes almost startles us with realism and naturalism. The Pardoner, for example, who harangues the pilgrims on the deadly sins, forgets that he is addressing a cavalcade and drops into the pulpit manner: "If any weight be in the Chirche now". Equally unexpected and equally Chaucerian is Chanticleer, the Cook's translation of a Latin Phrase for the benefit of his wife, Dame Pertelote in The Nonne's Priests's Tale.

> For also silker as in principle. Mulierest 'bonmomos'
> confusion. Madame, the sentence of this Latin is
> Woman is manners, joye and all his blis.

The whole of that tale, in which the Cock and the Hen argue learnedly on the cause of dreams, supporting their rival theories by an array of authorities after the manner of the medieval disputations is a masterpiece.

Moreover, Chaucer loves fun at his own expense. In the House of Frame, he dreams that he is carried up to heaven by an Eagle. In the mid-air he speculates on the reason for this sudden seizure and for a moment, imagines that Jove perhaps intends to "stellify" him. The flattering thought is soon dispelled by the eagle:

For Jove is not the about I do wel puttle thee out of doubt To make of thee as yet a sterre.

The poet is also humiliated on the road to Canterbury. For instance, the tale which he puts into his own mouth is a ridiculous romance called *The Tale of Sir Thopas.* The host endures this ditty until the beginning of the second "fit", but he can contain himself no longer:

> No more of this for goddes dignitee, Quod our hoste, for thou makest me So wery of thy varray lewednesse, That also wisly god my soule blesse, Myneres aken of thy drasty speche. Now swiche a rym the devel I biteche; This may well be rym degrel, quod he.

Chaucer reveals the fresh and spontaneous humour of common men and women. He is never bitter and unsympathetic despite his occasional satirical digs. Sometimes he ridicules the absurdities of his age. The Friar in *The Summoner's Tale,* who is a social parasite, is ridiculed. Chaucer's satirical tone is noted here and there is the depiction of some of the characters in *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.* Chaucer employs homour, satire and irony in exposing the shady sides of the characters of the Summoner and Pardoner. The poet humorously tells us that the face of the Summoner was fire-red like that of cherub, his eyes were narrow, while his temperament as hot and lustful as that of a sparrow. After drinking a lot of liquor, he would not speak any other language but Latin. His knowledge of this language was limited only to two or three words. He was so cunning that he could defraud any rascal. He would also teach the wrong-doers that if they have committed any sin, they need not be afraid of the Archdeacon's curse because they could get their punishment commuted if they spend some money. Chaucer also laughs at the expense of the Pardoner. A Pardoner is a man of religion and is supposed to be thoroughly corrupt and immoral :

> Full loude he song Com hider. love, to me !

His wallet was full of 'pardons', all fresh from Rome. We laugh when the image of the beardless face of the Pardoner rises before our eyes and when we are told that his voice was like that of a goat :

> A voys hadde as small as hath a goat : No berd had he, he

never should have As smothe it was it were lately-shave I
trowe he were a geldying or a mare.

Thus, we laugh at the outer shape of the Pardoner as well as the incongruities and contradictions in his innerself.

If Chaucer is democratic in the delineation of character, he is also democratic in his sense of humour. That is to say, if he ridicules his male pilgrims, he also ridicules his female pilgrims, the character, though to the twentieth century reader she does not appear to be an oddity, for obvious reasons, though here Chaucer projects the image of a librated woman, who vied with man in every sphere of activity. Particularly in the chess game of sexual activity.

Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve, Withouten other compainy in youth, But there of needh not to speak as now.

In the same way, Chaucer is ironic and humorous when he gives the description of the Prioress, called Madam Englantyne :

Ful weel she soong the service Dyvyne, Entunned in his nose
ful-seemely,
And French she spak ful faire and fetishly
....
She leet no morsel from her lippse falle No wette hir fyngers in
hir sauce depe

Chaucer also refers to style of speech followed by this lady And
French she spak full faire and fetishly,
After the scole of Statford atte Bowe
For French of Paris was to hir unknowe.

Although there is an element of satire and irony mingled in Chaucer's humour; on the whole, his attitude is not bitter. It can be said that rather than being a serious satirist, Chaucer is a lively humorist whose main aim is to entertain the readers. *Even in The Pardoner's Tale* where Chaucer introduces us to a hypocrite who says one thing and practises quite another. Chaucer is not bitter. In the "Prolouge" to his tale, the Pardoner makes no secret of his real intentions when he says that his sermons are intended only to induce people to give him money and not to bring about any reform or revolution in their moral consciousness. In *The Pardoner's Tale,* the paradox of a perfect scoundrel telling a moral story amuses us, though an attitude to the hypocritical Pardoner is characterized by disgust and contempt. In painting the pictures of gluttons and drunkards, the Pardoner acts as the mouth-piece of Chaucer himself, who is laughing at the vices of mankind. The Pardoner quotes St. Paul to stress the idea that the meat and the stomach that consumes it would be destroyed by God. In the same way, he ridicules a drunken man by pointing out that his face is disfigured, his breath is sour and his heavy snoring seems to suggest as if he were saying "Samson Samson", though

Samson himself never tasted any wine. In fact, from the beginning to the end, the tale is full of several kinds of humour-genial, satirical and frolical. The climax is reached when towards the end of his tale the Pardoner offers his relics to the same people whom he has been telling all along how he has used these relics for cheating the credulous and ignorant people. When Pardoner asks the Host to come forward and make his offering (for he is the most sinful person of all other pilgrims), the latter makes a devastating reply which silences the Pardoner. This part of the poem is full of rustic humour and the 'psychic censor' fails to control the flood of laughter rising in the hearts of the readers.

To grasp the secret of Chaucer's humour, one has to remember the poet who, with all his wide learning, is a great humorist, intensely interested in the oddities of human nature. His aim is never to be a moralist or a preacher. He observes the social and religious landscape of his county sympathetically and humorously. No doubt, he reveals the incongruities of his age, but his critical attitude is always mild and humorous. Unlike Langland who is a bitter satirist and a stern moralist, Chaucer takes this world lightly and liberally; and he does not specifically and directly criticize any institution of his age. He is a poet who explores the theme of the individual's relation to society, as he is a part of it. He exposes the various clashes among characters and their interest and demonstrates the comic and ironic effects obtained from the class distinctions felt by the newly, emerged bourgeoise associated with the growth of town life and the trade and commerce. Chaucer's humour is the offspring of large humanity and catholicity of temper. His understanding sympathy with the seamy side of life; his keen observation, (his sense of the ludicrous which makes him alive to any incongruity or absurdity), his genial and sunny temperament which enables him to observe with amused delight and half shut eyes the frailties, weakness of mankind all these qualities make him a great humorist. Indeed, the prevailing feature of Chaucer's humour is its urbanity: the man of the world's kindly tolerance of the weaknesses of his erring fellow mortals. In the words Compton-Rickett, "For all his considerable powers to pathos, his happy fancy, his lucid imagination, he is a great humorist that he lingers longest in our memories, with a humour rich, profound and same devoid of spite and cynicism irradiated by a genial kindliness and a consummate knowledge of human nature."

Chaucer's humour is all pervasive like that of Shakespeare who does not fail to notice the 'glow worms' of laughter and smile even in the dark and gloomy atmosphere of his tragedies, as is clear from the Porter Scence in *Macbeth.* In Chaucer's *Tales,* there are tragedies as well as comedies. Some are, of course, grave and subdued, while others are ablaze with colour and merriment, but the thread of honest and innocent laughter runs through almost all of them.

1.3.5 Self Check Exercise

1 Discuss Chaucer's use of wit and irony in The Prologue.

2 Discuss Chaucer's Prologue as a portrait gallery.

1.3.6 Summary

To sum up in the words of George Saintsbury, it is desirable to notice that Chaucer employs his humour with a remarkable difference. "In most great English humorists, humour sets the picture with atmosphere exaggeration and fantasy. By Chaucer it is almost inveriably used to bring a higher but a quite clear and a dramatic light on the picture itself. But also when turned rapidly the other way to show its real texture, the jest is perhaps a burning to that magnifying glass to bring out a special trait more definitely. It is also of a great deal of the combination of vivacity and veracity in Chaucer's portraits and sketches of all kinds is due to this all pervading humour; indeed, it is not very likely that anyone would deny this. He is not a sentimentalist, he does not go out of his way for pathetic effect but in the leading instances of *The Clerk's* and *Prioress Tales,* he shows an immediate enforced, unfaltering sympathy which can hardy be paralleled. His good humour is even more pervading. It gives memorable distinction of kindliness between "*The Wife of Bath, Prologue* and the brilliant following of it by Dunba in the *The Jua Marlit Women and the We*. It even separates Chaucer from such later humorists as Addison and Jane Austen, who though never savage can be politely cruel. Cruelty and Chaucer are absolute strangers, indeed the absence of it has been brought upon him, by rather short sighted persons, the charge of obscurantism."

1.3.7 Short Questions

1 Who were the main writers that influenced the Age of Chaucer?

2 Why does Chaucer's characterization?

1.3.8 Long Questions

1 What is Geoffrey Chaucer's influence on English and English Literature?

2 Discuss Chaucer as a poet of transition.

1.3.9 Suggested Readings

- *Chaucer and His Poetry* : G.L. Kittredge.
- *A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* : Muriel Bowden.
- *Chaucer and His World* : E.E. Halliday.
- *Chaucer* (Literature in Perspective) : M.W. Grose.
- *History of English Literature,* Legouis and Cazamian.
- *Chaucer* : *The Canterbury Tales* (Casebook Series), ed., J.J. Anderson
- *Medieval English Literature,* W.P. Ker.

M.A. (ENGLISH) PART-I **COURSE-I**

SEMESTER-I **INTRODUCTION TO POETRY : MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE**

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER: "PROLOGUE" TO CANTERBURY TALES

STRUCTURE

1.4.1 Objectives

- To discuss the technique of realization English Literature.
- To discuss how Geoffrey Chaucer employs realism on The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.
- To discuss Chaucer's narrative art on the prologue the Canterbury Tales.

1.4.2 Introduction

The main aim of this unit is to introduce Realism in Chaucer's Literary Masterpiece The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer's narrative art shall also be discussed in detail for Chaucer is hailed as one of the best story tellers in the history of English Literature.

1.4.3 Chaucer's Realism

Chaucer is essentially a great realist. His acquaintance with the fourteenth Century English life is full while his insight is keen and deep. As we read the "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales* a vast panorama of English social, political and religious life opens before us. De Selincourt calls Chaucer : "a realist of realists", and "in Chaucer's England, we see for the first time the modern mingling with the medieval, and English, herself beginning to emerge as a distinct nation," so writes G.M. Trevelyan. In the words of Legouis, Chaucer "is just as truly the social chronicler of England

at the end of the fourteenth century as Froissart is the military and political chronicler of the same period." Chaucer's realism is neither studied nor artificial. He saunters gaily through life pausing to notice every trifle as he passes.

While his contemporaries were dreaming and weaving allegories, or entangling themselves in the web of medieval philosophy "before Chaucer the Muse of English Poetry had closed eyelids. Chaucer found a means of speaking direct to the hearts of future generations. He painted life as he saw it- "he conceals nothing, he condemns nothing' and he saw it with so observant an eye that his epoch has become one of the vivid epochs of history, comparable even to the age of Cicero and the age of Shakespeare. In *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer has taken into compass the various manners and humours of the whole English nation of his age. He gives us a microcosm of English society. High and low meet "with no class feeling" in a perfect democracy to travel. It is a representative assembly, a parliament of social and industrial England." Except the very highest and the very lowest every important phase of life is represented Chivalry, Church, Professional Men, Trade, Commerce and Agriculture etc. Chaucer has the glance of an Indian Philosopher which passes over all obvious matters to light upon significant detail.

Chaucer was a man of the world, mixing freely with all types of mankind, and he used his opportunities to observe the little peculiarties of human nature. He had the seeing eye, the retentive memory, the judgement to select, and the capacity to expound. He knew the people and he painted them for us with all their tricks and external peculiarties. In the course of his life, Chaucer had come into contact with almost all the characters whom he paints in the "Prologue", the Knight, the Squire, the Merchant, the Sailor, the Scholar, the Doctor, the Monk, Labourers, Saints and Knaves he knew them intimately. "And that is why we feel that they are in the poem such as they were in reality, they are true to life," as Legouis would like to put it. His characters are timeless creations on a time determined stage. Every age is a Canterbury pilgrimage and so is every country. The pilgrimage is the pilgrimage of the world and the world, and the pilgrims, the epic tome of mankind. There is willing suspension of disbelief, and so long as the cavalcade moves before our eyes, we feel the warmth of a close association with the world of reality. The contrasts of life are expressed in the Tales as well as in the description of details in dress, person or behaviour.

As few illustrations from the "Prologue' will make it clear how Chaucer represents his age realistically.

The Chivalric spirit of the medieval times is visible in the portrait of the Knight.

At mortal battles had he been fifteen

Chaucer's Knight is brave, patriotic and ever ready to make any sacrifice for his motherland and his religion. In spite of this, he is meek

and polite.

He never yet no vileynee ne saved In all his lif, unto on manner wight He was a very perfect gentil Knight.

He is the true symbol of the old world of knighthood that was passing away giving place to a new conception of chivalry represented by his son, the Squire who is hardly as sober and prudent as his father is. One of the Sqruire's task was to be brave before the company. He wore a garment embroidered and passed his days in singing or playing upon his flute. He could also compose songs himself, flight in a tournament, dance and write.

Chaucer paints a realistic picture of the religious conditions of his times in the "Prologue ". Like Langland, he does not pointedly strike at the corruption prevalent in the church, but simply holds a mirror to that institution which had become a "den of stagnant waters". Chaucer's Monk is more interested in hunting that in the holy rites and reading the Bible.

He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen

That seith that hunters belth nat holy men.

And the Friar, instead of leading a holy and religious life and devoting his time to the service of suffering humanity, had taken of evil ways:

He knew the taverns well in every town

... ...

But than a lazer or a beggestere.

The Summoner and the Pardoner are traders rather than religious men. They sell pardons to those who pay them. Of spiritual purity little was left in the country. The greater prelates heaped up wealth and lived in a luxury in a godless world : the rank and file of the clergy were ignorant and careless. But in the figure of the Parson Chaucer paints the picture of an ideal clergyman

A good man was there of religion And was a poor Parson of a Town.

But rich he was of hooly thought and work.

In the *Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer present realistically the political conditions of his times. In Clerk's Tale and in the Nun's Priest Tale, he refers to stormy people and the Peasant's Revolt. These references, however, are only casual. It may be pointed out that Chaucer was not a poet of the people. He wrote for cultured readers and a refined society. "The great vital issues of the day never inspired his verse. The great plague, faminers and popular discontent do not figure in his poetry. As pointed out by Lovet and Moody, *"The Canterbury Tales* contain few references to the plague, only one to the peasant's uprising and only one to the Lollard movements and these references are casual or jesting." On the whole, he left the burning question alone.

In Chaucer's times trade and commerce were flourishing. There were rich and prosperous merchants and tradesmen. The majority of them earned money by cheating or by some other unfair means. Among this class, we see

the Shipman, the Merchant, the Doctor of 'Physik' and a Bailiff.

As to the Shipman "full many draught of why hadde he drawe," and the Merchant could indulge well smuggling.

He Wold the see were kept for anything Well koude he in exchange sheedless selle.

The Doctor of Physic knew well how to amass wealth. By his natural magic he could interpret the ascendant as fortunate for the patient and cure him by the images. Chaucer satirises the greedy nature of the Doctor in the following lines :

For gold in physik is a cordial Therefore he loved gold in special. The Miller knew how to steal corn and take toll thrice, and the Manciple of the inns of Court, whether he paid in cash or bought on credit, was always so watchful while making a purchase that he made a good bargain.

Moreover, Chaucer depicts the condition of women of his times, the table manners and the conditions of inns. The Prioress (Nun), another nun, her chaplain and the wife of Bath are three ladies in the "Prologue". They are the true representatives of the women of fourteenth century. The Prisoress was well awere of the table manners :

She let no morse! from hir lippes fall,

Ne wette her fingers in her sauce depe.

and the 'Good Wife was their of besides Bath. She had such a skill in clothmaking that she surpassed the weavers of Ypres and Ghent. But

She was worthy woman all her life Husbands at Chirche she had five. Withouten Other Compaigne in Youth.

Chaucer attacks women very bitterly in keeping with the conventional attitude of the men of his age. In the "Nun's Priests Tale", Chaucer says that a husband who follows the advice of his wife, will come to grief. But even then we cannot call him a woman hater.

In Chaucer's England, inns were situated at some distances and beer was also served in these inns as was done in the taverns, the favourite haunt of the Friar.

Through the character of the Clerk, Chaucer presents not only an ideal scholar but also the spirit of new learning which began to be popular in those days.

Twenty books, clad in black or red Of Aristotle and his philosophy that always lay at the bed-side of the Clerk, is a clear proof of the fact that the gates of the fouteenth century England were opened to the rich realm of Greek literature and philosophy. Thus,we see that Chaucer is no visionary, afraid of facts of life, dwelling in a world of beauty and delight which has no counterpart, on earth, but a poet who takes no shame in the

human nature, whose eyes see so clearly that they are not blinded by evil. As Hadow says, Chaucer, is "ever ready to plunge into the dust and din of ordinary life, he never forgets the wonder and mystery that lies behind the commonplace." Chaucer was of the earth, earthy, but there is nothing sordid or unwholesome in his view of life and in his love of it.

To sum up, Chaucer's realism in the words of Hazlitt : "He speaks of what he wishes to describe with the accuracy, the discrimination, of one who relates what has happened to himself. Yet he never omit any material cirumstance." He is the Homer of human nature because he holds the mirror up to the life of his time and his works reflect his country not in fragments, but completely.

Modern appeal of Canterbury Tales-: Chaucer as the author of *Canterbury Tales* is undoubtedly the greatest poet of medieval England. The first two stages of his poetical career, namely, the French period of Translation and the Italian period of imitation are long over. In *Canterbury Tales* which is his masterpiece, the poet figures as the best interpreter of the medieval culture of England and even of the continent, and yet the total appeal of his *Canterbury Tales* is deeply modern. Several reasons account for the perennial modernity of the final appeal of *Canterbury Tales.*

First, Chaucer attempts in *Canterbury Tales* to represent medieval life, persons in action and their dress and manners and puts into their mouth stories that bear, in most cases, the individualising stamp of their personalities. In a world persons and perspectives are perfectly harmonized in (a) Chaucer's portraiture of men and women and (b) the conduct of the different Tales. One may generalise that the social appeal of *The Canterbury Tales* is far deeper as well as more extensive than the merely political and military appeal of a Froissart, or the merely fragmentary appeal of a Boccaccio, concentrating on the life and manners of a cultured, sophisticated age.

Secondly, Chaucer's characters are both-types and individuals.

Note : For further elaboration of this point, consult Chaucer's art of Characterisation, Chaucer is a colourist, an imagist and, above all a realist. By a Colourist is meant as one who in a scene or situation is akin to an artist who lays emphasis on the colour-scheme of characters or situation or both; an imagist is an artist who lays stress on the particular, concrete well- defined images rather than on general, total impressions.

In this connection, we may recall Ezra Pound's definition of image as "an intellectual and emotional complex presented in an instant of time."

The marvellous combination of colour, image and realism, of which *The Canterbury Tales* is the capital example contributes to its ultimate modern appeal. Thus, the doublet of Chaucer's Knight contrasts with the threadbare cloak of the poor clerk of Oxford, while the greyish cloak of Man of Law contrasts with the grey overcoat sitting loose on the Reeve, slender limbs and so on. These aspects of Chaucer's Characterisation reveal the poets deep sense of colour and image and appeal to the modern reader. Again, we have in Chaucer's Doctor, a physician who prefers 'gold' or his 'fee' to the patients' cure. More than one physician in modern society answers to Chaucer's immortal prototype.

Thirdly, it is Chaucer's humour that accounts for the modern appeal of his *Canterbury Tales.* In this poetic world if allegory and satire are great, humour is greater. Chaucer is gifted with abundance of genial humour. As we read the "Prologue", the thirty pilgrims pass before our mind's eye, against their medieval setting. Layer after layer, their medieval trappings fall off in the distance, and they come home to spite of all the scientific advancement of the 20th Century any married couple may enjoy the humour of the "Nun's Priests's Tale". In a world the modern appeal of *The Canterbury Tales* is the result of the alchemy of the humourist by which Chaucer transmutes the baser facts of contemporary life into golden-hued perception of art.

Thus, the vivid picture of the fourteenth century with a universal appeal combine with all the fine poetical qualities discussed above, make Chaucer the earliest of modern the 'Father of English Literature' as Dryden rightly puts it.

1.4.4 CHAUCER'S NARRATIVE ART

The art of narration is a kin of the dramatic art; it demands of the narrative poet an objectivity of temper and an impersonal attitude towards life. The ideal method of story telling in verse is one that gives equal emphasis on character and situation and thus diversifies the story with detail in order to bring into harmony the subjective and the objective values of life in a total complex. artistic picture with a left side lean towards the impersonal. Balance and restraint, subordination of detail to the whole and co-ordination of character and circumstances these are the essential qualities of story-teller.

Chaucer is essentially a great narrative artist; and his greatness as a poet is strongly founded, besides other qualities, on his matchless narrative skill. To quote Kitteridge : "Chaucer is known to everybody as the Prince of Story- tellers," and according to G.K. Chesterton, he is not only the father of "all our poets, but grand father of all our million novelists." Of course, as

pointed out by Matthew Arnold Chaucer lacks the "high seriousness" : and sublimity for great classical poets like Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton but he is certainly "our greatest story-teller in verse" one of the world's three or four story-tellers as lowellsays. Other writers have greater moments, but none has the excellence of Chaucer. He can tell a realistic or a romantic tale with same skill and success. In the Middle Ages, a true poet was regarded as story-teller or a trouvere : and Chaucer is a trouvere par excellence. If born four centuries later, he might have been the greatest of the novelists of the eighteenth century.

Chaucer's narrative power is at its immortal masterpiece in *The Canterbury Tales.* He may have derived the idea of a connected series of tales from Boccaccio,but the framework of *The Canterbury Tales* is far more artistic than that of the Decameron. Decameron has so many drawbacks. There is no movement and variety in the action of the story. Secondly, it is mechanical and monotonous. But *The Canterbury Tales* is far better because it narrates the various moods of the company as pointed out by Dryden. The action of the poem varies according to the passion of the pilgrims and the narration does not become tedious or boring.

The plan and design of *The Canterbury Tales* reveals Chaucer's deep interest in story-telling. Like a born story-teller he foresees the necessity of bringing together persons from different ranks and social positions for providing the enjoyment of variety in narration as well as in dress, manners and habits. The thirty pilgrims meet at the Tabard inn and the Host Harry Bailly. Inn keeper is accepted as their guide on the way to Canterbury. To enliven the journey, the host proposes that everyone of the pilgrims will tell two tales during their journey to Canterbury and two tales more on their journey back to London. The proposal is accepted, and the following morning, as the caravan moves on, the pilgrims enjoy the variety and wit, romance and advanture and tragedy and comedy of the various stories told by different narrators. The stories of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are intersting in themselves,but they are more interesting as pieces of narrative that throw a flood of light on the character and personality of those who tell them. Here we find a subtle portrayal of the virtues and vices that pervade the entire scheme of things in our day-to-day life.

The art of Chaucer as a narrative poet may be analysed thus:

First, like Shakespeare, Chaucer rarely troubled to invent a plot for himself but The Canterbury Tales for which no originals has yet been found, Chaucer takes his raw material from various sources : Latin, French and Italian. It seems that the poet, in search of 'stories of matter', rummages history, tradition and mythology, Classical and non-classical, Christian and Pagan. This fact bears witness to the sweep of his survey. But whatever he borrows he makes entirely his own. Chaucer and Shakespeare, though of course in different degrees of excellence and vivifying power, so frequently make dry bones live, transform dull

chronicles, legends and stupid tales into literary gems, sparkling with animation and realism they invest them with the deepest human interest. But Chaucer never conceals his sources as Shakespeare does. He borrows his plot, but his style is his own; and it is in this sense that both Chesterton and R.R. Root regard Chaucer as an original poet.

Secondly, his *Tales* show an infinite variety of Characters, situations and feelings. This equality reveals his singular fertility of imagination while his contemporaries were dreaming and weavig allegories of entangling themselves in the web of medieval philosophy before Chaucer and Muse of English Poetry had closed eyelids Chaucer struck a note of realism in his *The Canterbuty Tales.* To Chaucer the interest lies in the study of normal men and women; and indeed he gives a true picture of the contemporary life and manners. A variety of characters represent a cross section of English life in the fourteenth century. They are the product of his deep interest in human affairs. Chaucer's work can be given the highest place of honour even among the greatest works of great novelists. The exquisite portraits of Chaucer, rich in variety, realism and freshness, made Chesterton regard the "*Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* as the Prologue to the Modern European Fiction" and Chaucer is 'one of the fore-runners of modern English novel'.

Thirdly, Chaucer's unerring judgement in the distribution of emphasis or intrigue or circumstance, character of emotion according to the varying needs of the story maintains the balance of interest throught out. Every story is so transacted that it suits the temper of its teller. The story of the knight is the story of chivalry and war; the clerk narrates a story that has wifely devotion as its theme, the coarse and farcical stories of the Miller and the Reeve suit their nature and living. The character of the tales with their tellers is a convincing proof of Chaucer's masterly skill as a narrator. Thus, a careful reading of the stories would reveal that the Prioress and the wife of Bath can not, by any stretch of imagination, exchange their stories between themselves. The tales are as richly diverse as the charachers, and we can say with Dryden that "here is God's Plenty."

Fourthly, while handling a story, Chaucer practises with a sense of mastery, the art of expansion, contraction and modification, whenever the need be. For instance, in telling the story of Constance (The Man of Law's Tale), he considerably compresses the original version. Thus, he holds the reader's attention throughtout. His narrative method is simple and direct; his stories have a single plot, but there is suspense till the end of the story. His anxiety to come to the point, sometimes involves him in unnecessary repetitions and digressions. But these digressions are deliberate and serve some philosophical purpose. For example, in *The knight's Tale* the digression provides the opportunity to the poet to comment on human blindness that unknowingly invites its own doom. Unlike Spenser, his interest lies not in description but in narration. Chaucer relates, rather than describes; "he lingers longer on actions and characters of his heroes

than on their onward appearance "the as Ten Brink puts it.

Fifthly, there are in *The Canterbury Tales,* numerous examples of humour, irony, satire and even farce. This sense of humour contributes substantially to his success as a great narrative poet. He is considered to be the first great humorist of Europe; and Masefield calls him a great Renaissance gentleman mocking the Middle Ages. Humour is all-pervading quality in him. It is here, there and everywhere; and even the serious pieces have an understone of humour. *The Knight's Tale* and the mournful *Tale of the Man of Law* are beautiful examples of this undercurrent of humour.

1.4.5 Self Check Exercise

1 Discuss the character of the wife of both.

2 Black Death.

1.4.6 Summary

Finally, the "Prologue" is the first act in the drama and gives the dramatic personnel of the comedy not intended for the stage. The conception of *The Canterbury Tales* as a drama is Chaucer's masterpiece. The drama as a literary form did not exist. As it is, he had adopted the narrative form, but the dramatic power is plainly there. This is shown in the individualism of his charachers generally; secondly he expands any situation which affords opportunity to add dialogue and intensify emotion. For example, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is pregnant with dramatic action. If Chaucer had been born in Elizabethan time, he would have written plays.

The fact is that the "Prologue" to the *Canterbuty Tales* contains the elements both of novel and drama.

All the qualities referred to above, coupled with Chaucer's fine economy of art, go to make him "one of the world's three or four story-tellers in verse". He is modern among the medievals and medieval among the moderns.

1.4.7 Short answer questions

1 Chaucer's literary period.

2 Define University Wits.

1.4.8 Long answer Questions

1 Discuss the Prologue as a Portrait Gallery.

2 Geoffrey Chaucer as a social chronicler of his age.

3 Discuss the Character of the nun.

1.4.9 Suggested Readings

- *Chaucer and His Poetry* : G.L. Kittredge.
- *A Reader's Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* : Muriel Bowden.
- *Chaucer and His World* : E.E. Halliday.
- *Chaucer* (Literature in Perspective) : M.W. Grose.
- *History of English Literature,* Legouis and Cazamian.

- *Chaucer* : *The Canterbury Tales* (Casebook Series), ed., J.J. Anderson
- *Medieval English Literature,* W.P. Ker.

M.A. (English) Part - I **Course-I**

Semester-I **INTRODUCTION TO POETRY : MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE**

Lesson No. 1.5 **Author : Dr. Sant Singh Bal**

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JOHN DONNE

1.5.1 Objectives

1. To apprise students with metaphysical school of poetry
2. To familiarize the students with the poetry of the famous metaphysical poet John Donne.

1.5.2 John Donne: An Introduction

No poet or writer is able to "distance" himself in a creative work of art so completely as to eliminate his own private dreams, fears and distempers. It logically follows that some knowledge of an artist's private life is essential for a complete understanding of his work. It may be pointed out at the very outset that not much is known of Donne's early life. Herbert Grierson attributes this obscurity to the fact "that in his later years, Donne was not unwilling to cover up his early traces of comprehending contradictions which seem inherent in all the typical characters of the Renaissance." Still it is possible, to some extent, to reproduce the circumstances and the intellectual and spiritual experiences from which his intensely personal poetry flowed. In fact, biographers generally follow Donne's life through his poems, letters and sermons.

Born in 1572, Donne was the son of a well-to-do citizen of London. His mother came of a distinguished family devoted to the service of the Faith, for she was the sister of Jasper Heywood, one of the earliest of the Jesuit missionary priests (and grandfather of Elizabeth), and sister of Sir Thomas More who had laid down his life for the faith and the spiritual

supremacy of the Pope. Thus, he was born and brought up as a Roman Catholic and he lived in a time when the course of man's life and the proximity of his death could be crucially shaped and determined by his religious beliefs. Donne's father died on January 16, 1576. In October 1583, Donne entered Hart Hall at Oxford, where he lived for three years. In 1587, he was transferred to Trinity College, Cambridge. His three years at Cambridge must have given him good opportunity to come into close relationship with intelligent apologists.

1.5.3 John Donne's Life and works

In his twentieth year, in 1592, he entered Lincoln's Inn. In London, he became the centre of circle with law students, young diplomats, rich courtiers who read his poems in manuscript and tried to imitate him. Commenting on his youthful behaviour, Sir Richard Baker says : "Mr. John Donne lived at the Inn of Court, not dissolute, but very neat, a great visitor of Ladies; a great frequenter of plays; a great writer of conceited verses." He combined the gaiety and sophistication of a city gallant with omnivorous reading, which accounts for the tone and sparkling wit within his early poetry. Around 1595-96, he went abroad visiting Italy and Spain and received some general influences from the tone of the literature of those countries. In fact, of all the Elizabethan poets, Donne is the most independent in the choice of subject matter and style.

Through Sir Henry Wotton, with whom Donne had been intimate at Oxford, he came into contact with Essex, and took part in the expedition to Cadiz in 1596 and to the Azores in 1597, the ocassion of his two poems, "The Storm" and "The Calm". In the second of these adventures, he was associated with young Thomas Egerton, son of Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and on his return became secretary to that statesman. But in 1601, he secretly married Ann More, Lady Egerton's niece and thus ruined his hope and chances of 'preferment' and worldly success and prosperity. He was dismissed and jailed and thereafter, for fourteen years (1601 to 1615) his life was one of humiliating dependence on the small charities of others. Strangely enough his political work at this time is not an outburst of youthful romance, but "The Progress of the Soul", a study of transmigration. He wrote extensively for his patrons, and assisted Thomas Morton in his controversies with the Roman Catholics. He wrote elegy on the untimely death of Prince Henry. His two greatest funeral elegies, "An Anatomy of the World" and "The Progress of the Soul", (Sometimes called the First and the Second Anniversaries) were written on

the occasion of the death of young girl Elizabeth, daughter of Sir Robert Drury. As Donne remarked to Ben Jonson, Elizabeth symbolized the "Idea of a Woman" and virtue in the world. To this period belong too, his prose works *Biathanatos*, a philosophical discussion on the question of suicide, and *the Essay on Divinity*, containing his own reasons for accepting Anglicanism.

At last, Sir George More forgave the young couple and made an allowance to his daughter. Donne grew more ascetic and intellectual in his aptitude and tastes. At the first instance, he refused the offer of receiving a comfortable living by entering the Church of England. Later in 1615, however, when he wrote "Pseudo-Martyr' he won the favour of James I, and under strong pressure from him, he agreed to be ordained as Reader in Lincoln's Inn. The same year, he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity by Cambridge University.

In 1617, his wife died in childbirth. Donne expressed his respect and love for her in two of the farewell poems "Sweetest Love; I do not go/For Wearinesse of Thee" and "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." This grim personal tragedy turned Donne towards the writing of devotional poetry. He settled with his seven children in lodgings provided by the administration of Lincoln's Inn. From May 1618 until early in 1620 he undertook a trip to the Continent. In 1621, he was appointed Dean of St. Paul College and he earned a fresh reputation as an eloquent preacher. His sermons are among the richest in English pulpit oratory, dealing almost exclusively with the transitoriness of human life. Donne preached these sermons on occasions, for over fifteen years, and they have taken their colour from the audience, as well as from Donne's mood of the moment. The tone varies widely. The other repeated charge that Donne is preoccupied with sin and death is not altogether baseless. In fact, the poet himself confesses his melancholy temperament, (calling it "a disease of the times") and constantly quotes St. Paul : "having a desire to deport and be with Christ."

Donne had to preach before the learned and at critical congregations at Lincoln's Inn twice every Sunday during the academic terms. He knew the character of his audience. He also knew the language of Law, a knowledge that enabled him frequently to drive home his point in legal idiom and metaphor. Moreover, his wide learning and experience outside a purely religious context, must have commanded the high esteem of an academic group. We only need to read those sermons preached by Donne to be assured of his fitness for his position and his success in it. He "carried some to heaven in holy raptures and

led others to amend their lives", and leaning over the pulpit with intense earnestness, he is compared by Izaak Walton to "an angel leaning from a cloud."

Towards the end of 1623, Donne was overcome by a serious illness. Out of his reflections on this illness, grew his most popular prose work, *Devotions on Emergent Occasions*, published in 1624. Having recovered from his illness, Donne became a friend of Izaak Walton, whose *Life of Dr. John Donne* is the foundation stone for any study of Donne's life. In 1625, when plague broke out in London, Donne took up lodgings at Chelsea. He returned to London in the beginning of 1626. The next five years of his life were years of many personal sorrows.

Donne's last sermon "Death's Duel" is his own funeral sermon and much more. In essence, he speaks of the vanity of human life, of the mightiness of God's redemptive power, and of the avenues of salvation. He died on 31st March, 1631. To quote Izaak Walton, "Thus variable thus virtuous was the life, thus excellent, thus exemplary was the death of this memorable man."

From the time of Wyatt and Surrey, English lyrical poetry had been inspired by Petrarch and other Italian poets. Later when the Italian influence had waned, the English poet turned to the French Poets, Ronsard and Du Bartas for inspiration. But Donne revolted against the Petrarchan tradition and the literary canons of his age. With him begins a new era in the history of English lyrical poetry, of English satire, and of English elegiac and religious verse. He despised the literary conventions, the moral of chivalry and the mythological lore and imagery. He refused to accommodate gods and goddesses and rejected "the spoils of Greek and Latin poetry". He was at once the chief inspirer of his young contemporaries who were still tied down to the existing modes and techniques and the poetry of eloquence, reason, argument and wit. He does not look back, like Chaucer, on the medieval twilight, nor is he immersed in the flood tide of Renaissance of Marlowe, Shakespeare and Bacon although to J.B. Leishman, the author of *The Monarch of Wit* (1951), he often appeared a "character whom Shakespeare might have invented." He is original both in the choice of his subject matter and his style. In Elizabethan and Metaphysical imagery, Rosemond argues that "Donne's innovations did run counter to contemporary rules". There is not much force in this argument, for even if Donne is to be regarded as exploiting and implementing the existing literary theory, his practice constitutes the kind of departure which makes a definite change in the course of literary history.

But unfortunately, so magnificient a poet as Donne was neglected for about two centuries. Donne's poetic fame remained high up to the Restoration, but sank to a low in the eighteenth century. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Swinburne and Lowell independently, wondered at the capriciousness of literary fame when they found Donne, still widely unrecognized. In fact, as Helen Gardner points out, it was the "wit" of Donne, not his music or his passion, or his dramatic force, that the Caroline poets tried to emulate; and it was because of a change in the notion of what "true wit" was that Donne sank in repute taste of nineteenth century was hardly more favourable to him than taste of the eighteenth century. He only received some selective praise from Coleridge. But during the early years of the 20th century, critical opinion turned in his favour to the degree that raised him to unprecedented heights (by the twenties). Be that as it may, in the present century, Donne's poetry has come back into general esteem and he and his followers-the seventeenth century metaphysical poets-have merged "in the direct current of English poetry", thanks to the critical pen of Grierson. Later, T.S. Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets" had a significant role in re-establishing Donne as great poet.[1]

We may divide Donne's poetic career into two distinct periods- (a) the period of secular verse and (b) the period of religious verse and prose.[2] The greatest part of his verse is animated by what Saintsbury calls "a spiritualised worldliness" and the prose by "a spiritualism which has left worldliness far behind." The force of transcendentalism and sensuality and passion for the blandishments of life and mysticism are interlocked in his work. These things present an integrated image of Donne, the love poet and Donne the divine poet. It is this fact which gives his poetics vast dimensions and accounts for his overwhelming appeal to the twentieth century complex civilization that demands difficult poetry.

The evaluation of Donne's secular verse must begin with his *Songs and Sonnets*. These poems were read in manuscript in Donne's life time by a small and sophisticated circle. They certainly exhibit "the outbreaks of far-fetched wit" in the little squib called, "The Courtier's Library". This collection of fifty-five love lyrics was published by Donne's son in 1633,

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1 It may, at the same time, be pointed out that by 1931, Eliot had withdrawn to a large extent from his earlier position. See, his essay, "A Garland for John Donne".

2 His prose works do not concern us here.

after the poet's death. It includes, amongst others, such well-known lyrics as "The Ecstasie", "The Relique", "The Flea", "A Valediction : Forbidding Mourning", "A Valediction : Of Weeping", "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day", "The Good Morrow", "Love's Diet", "The Dissolution", "Farewell to Love", etc. These poems had a wide circulation in manuscript. In fact, the *Songs and Sonnets* are really the most fascinating poems, written at different times in different moods, and addressed to different persons. Some of these love poems are sensual, while others are directly or indirectly passionate : "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love"; "If yet I have not all the love; Twice or thrice I loved thee"; "Take heed for loving me." But there are still other pieces in which Donne rises to a pure, spiritual level. For instance, In "The Ecstasy", he develops a philosophy of love that comes nearer to his later religious thought-interdependence of body and soul.

It is pertinent to note that while inspiration for some of these lyrics came from Donne's sweetheart, Anne More; one or two are addressed to Lucy, the Countess of Bedford. His sonnets are akin in point of subtlety to the most subtle of those which Shakespeare was writing at the time; but they surpass the Shakespearean sonnets in passion, feeling, sensuality and wit. He brings together ideas as remote as the antipoles; mingling the sublime and the trivial. For instance, he will not let his beloved kill the flea in which their blood has mingled, and which is, therefore, the temple of their wedding.

In spite of jarring and unrefined lines here and there, these early poems of Donne are characterized by the harmonious echo of that union between passion and argument which is the essential quality of "metaphysical" lyric poetry.

Donne's elegies also belong to the early period of his creative career, these elegies are love poems in loose iambic pentameter couplets, owing a general debt, for tone and situation, to the *Amores* of Ovid, the Roman poet. These poems are full of sexual energy, and realistically narrate more than one nocturnal adventure. The poet certainly exploits the sexual puns so much enjoyed by Elizabethan readers. The women addressed by Donne in some of these poems lack virtue of faith. The very titles of elegies- "Jealousy", "The Perfume", "Love's Progress", "War", "Going to Bed", "The Bracelet" give clue to the nature of their theme. David Daiches comments: "The elegies are poems about love; some are cynical dealing with the paradoxes. Some celebrate a clandestine love with an uncomfortable realism." Donne mourns the death of his contemporaries. In a true

metaphysical sense, Donne is completely detached and acts as a source of consolation and spiritual comfort on the formal occasion of death.

Donne's Satires, Verses and Letters constitute an essential part of his literary achievement and belong to the same phase of his talent as the *Elegies*. They are, as Elizabethan satire was supposed to be, rough and harsh. The satires give us some vivid picture of the poet's contemporary London, coupled with his "tedious and complex arguments about religion."

On a huge hill Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will Reach her, about must go.

It may be pointed out that Donne's contribution in raising satire from (Elizabethan) the rough and harsh style of Elizabeathan age to a literary form is something unique. He paved the way for Pope, who acknowledged his greatness as a real satirist.

Donne's verse letters in his career are interesting than any other thing that he wrote. But of these "Letters to Several Personages", "The Storm" and "The Calm' are sharply portrayed pictures of the effect of the different situations and conditions at sea on the spirits of the men abroad. In the same way the verse letters addressed to the Countess of Bedford written as a compliment to one woman became in the final analysis an authentic comment on human nature in general, and the poem beginning with "You have fined me" is a great poem.

Religious Verse

Most of Donne's religious poems were written in the last phase of his life, although something of the religious tension within his consciousness is indicated by the poem, *The Progress of the Soul* also. In this poem, his aim appears to be to trace the progress of the soul, of the apple which Eve plucked in Eden, through all the celebrated heretics. He had abandoned his original religion for the Church of England by the time he wrote his poem which is satirical and pessimistic. The general disillusionment with Queen Elizabeth determines its tone. In the best of his paradox poems, the paradoxes of Donne's poetic art express with agonized intensity, the paradoxes involved in man's relation with God. They were written after his wife's death when the poet had liberated himself from the worldly and the sensuous entanglements and become an ascetic. In his hymns, he probes with fierce anxiety into the right- relationship with God:-

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and see to mend;.....

Sometimes in "Good Friday" (written before the death of his wife) the

force of the thought is more striking than the passionate union of thought and feeling. The poet says that while he is going Westward his thoughts turn towards the East-crucifixion of Christ-and he tries to fathom the depth of his paradox:

O think me worthy of thine anger, punish me, Burn off my rusts and my deformity,

Restore thine images so much by the grace That thou mayst know me, and I'll turn my face.

The nineteen Holy Sonnets embody the essence of Donne's religious poetry. These include, among other poems, "Batter my Heart", "Death be not Proud", "At the round earth's imagined corners", "Show me deare Christ, thy spouse", "The Cross". Exactly the same combination of thought and feeling as is found in the *Songs and Sonnets*, characterizes these poems, also. But besides this, an undercurrent of hope and anguish that disturbs the religious man, ever conscious both of his own smallness and of God's greatness, turns throughout the bodies of these sonnets. In the words of Grierson, the Holy Sonnets, for depth of passionate feeling have been compared by one critic with the sonnets on Michelangelo and other final hymns. The love of God is expressed in these sonnets-the perfect love that cast our fear that at last man should find that there is a way to Hell even from the gates of Heaven; the hymns strike a note of peace and confidence.

1.5.4 Self Check Exercise

1 Discuss the age of John Donne.
2 Discuss John Donne’s contribution to English literature.

1.5.5 Summary

To sum up, Donne's influence was felt both by secular and religious poets and with the passing of time, he came to be regarded as the father of the metaphysical school of poets (We shall discuss this school of poets in a separate lesson).

1.5.6 Short Questions

1 Discuss Religious verse by John Donne.
2 Who were the contemporaries of John Donne?

1.5.7 Long Questions

1 Discuss the evolution of metaphysical school of poetry.
2 What is metaphysical poetry? Discuss in detail its features.

1.5.8 Suggested Reading

1. Alvarez, A : *The School of Donne.* London; Chatto and Windus, 1961.
2. Bush, Douglas : *English Literature in the Early Seventeenth Century.* Oxford University, Press. 1945.
3. Bush, Douglas : *English Poetry* : *The Main Currents.* London: Methuen, 1952, 1961.
4. Gardner, Helen (ed.) : *John Donne : A Collection of Critical Essays.* Prentice Hall, 1962.
5. Grierson, Herbert (ed.) : *The Poems of John Donne*, Oxford Univerity, Press, 1937-1960.
6. Gosse, Edmund : *Life and Letters of John Donne*, Vols. I & II. London, 1989.
7. Hammond. G : *The Metaphysical Poets* (A Casebook). London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1947.
8. Smith, A.J., (ed.) : *John Donne : The Critical Heritage.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.
9. Williamson, George : *A Reader's Guide to Metaphysical Poets.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1968.

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JOHN DONNE
A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE PRESCRIBED POEMS-I

1.6.1 Objectives

1. To apprise students with metaphysical school of poetry
2. To familiarize the students with the poetry of the famous metaphysical poet John Donne.

1.6.2 John Donne: An Introduction

No poet or writer is able to "distance" himself in a creative work of art so completely as to eliminate his own private dreams, fears and distempers. It logically follows that some knowledge of an artist's private life is essential for a complete understanding of his work. It may be pointed out at the very outset that not much is known of Donne's early life. Herbert Grierson attributes this obscurity to the fact “that in his later years, Donne was not unwilling to cover up his early traces of comprehending contradictions which seem inherent in all the typical characters of the Renaissance.” Still it is possible, to some extent, to reproduce the circumstances and the intellectual and spiritual experiences from which his intensely personal poetry flowed. In fact, biographers generally follow Donne's life through his poems, letters and sermons.

Born in 1572, Donne was the son of a well-to-do citizen of London. His mother came of a distinguished family devoted to the service of the Faith, for she was the sister of Jasper Heywood, one of the earliest of the Jesuit missionary priests (and grandfather of Elizabeth), and sister of Sir Thomas More who had laid down his life for the faith and the spiritual supremacy of the Pope. Thus, he was born and brought up as a Roman

Catholic and he lived in a time when the course of man's life and the proximity of his death could be crucially shaped and determined by his religious beliefs. Donne's father died on January 16, 1576. In October 1583, Donne entered Hart Hall at Oxford, where he lived for three years. In 1587, he was transferred to Trinity College, Cambridge. His three years at Cambridge must have given him good opportunity to come into close relationship with intelligent apologists.

1.6.3 John Donne: A Critical Study of the Prescribed Poems

1.6.3.1 The Flea

In choosing to write on such a subject as a flea, Donne seems to fall in line with Ovid whose poem on the subject is quite well-known. In fact, during the Renaissance and the Elizabethan periods, flea was a popular subject for amorous verse. The poet envied the lot of the flea because of the liberties it could take with the body of the beloved which were denied to him. Donne's originality lies in the fact that through the flea, he explores the nature of love-relationship between man and woman. As a realist, he recognizes the demands of the body. The poet believes that the physical union is as essential in love as spiritual union is. The intensity and immediacy of emotion distinguishes this dramatic lyric from other poems on the subject.

The poem opens dramatically like most of Donne's poems in which a lover is addressing his sweetheart who is a silent listener like the girl in Robert Browning's, "The Last Ride Together". But her facial expression, the rise and fall of emotions in her heart and her callous indifference to the entreaties of the lover have been portrayed very skill- fully with deft touches so that the reader can visualize the whole situation vividly. The poet-lover asks his beloved to observe the flea which, after having 'sucked' his blood, is now 'sucking' hers. Thus, their bloods have mingled in the body of the flea, as they do in sexual act. The physical union which she has denied to him all along has been accomplished through the flea. The poet uses a metaphysical image when he tells his beloved that the flea has enjoyed physical union with her without following the usual course of wooing and oaths, trials and tribulations. If the act of the flea cannot be described as sinful, nor it means the loss of her virginity, why should she think that her physical union with her lover would be something immoral?

Confess it, this cannot be said
A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhood, Yet this enjoys before it woo, And pampered swells with one blood made of two, And this, alas, is more than we would do.

The opening line of the second stanza shows that the beloved, instead of feeling convinced with the lover's argument, only frowns and her

rash gestures show that she is going to kill the flea which, has by now, become the object of her contempt and anger. The poet argues with greater force and appeals to the lady to spare the flea in the name of their love. Their bloods have already been united together in its tiny body. Clearly, the flea is their "marriage bed" and "marriage temple" and their union stands sanctified, despite her objections and hostility of her parents. Therefore, if she kills the flea, it will be a triple murder, for flea embodies the lives of the lovers too, hence her act would be nothing short of a sin, a sacrilege:-

This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is; Though parents grudge, and you, we're met, And cloistered in these living walls of jet.

Though use make you apt to kill me, Let not to this self-murder added be,

And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

It may be noted that Donne's use of religious terms and metaphors for the trivial act of killing a flea imparts an unusual intensity and immediacy to his desire of consummating physical union with his lady love.

But acting like a stubborn woman she has scant regard for the logic or commonsense or for the holiness of the human heart. The beloved is "cruel and sudden" in killing the innocent insect. She has reddened her nails with the blood of the flea whose only guilt was to have 'sucked' a drop of blood from their bodies. The beloved then confronts the poet with a triumphant pose and asserts that neither of them is, in any way, weaker physically after the flea has been killed. Her assertion also implies that no sin is involved in the killing of the flea and that she has not lost any honour in the whole process. From this point, the poet argues that if his lady love yields to him she would lose as little blood and as little honour as she has lost through her physical contact with the flea which means that she would lose neither physical energy, nor honour if she eats, a "forbidden fruit." Therefore, she should come out of the shell of prudery and hypocrisy and taste the joys of physical love:

.....then learn how false, fears be
Just so much honour, when thou yieldst to me, Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

Thus, Donne has "demolished the conventional Petrarchan attitude towards love, as well as the false notions of honour and chastity. He has demonstrated that even true, spiritual love has its physical union. "He believes that genuine love is as much a union of bodies, as of souls. A.

J. Smith recognizes the force of anti-courtly and anti-Petrarchan attitude expressed in this poem. The sense of realism and emotional intensity coupled with the ingenuity and intellectual force with which the poem has argued the case for physical union makes "The Flea" a great poem. Therefore, James Reeves's criticism that the theme of the poem is "cynical and unpleasant" is not authentic.

Annotations and Explanatory Notes

mark	:	observe carefully
confer	:	acknowledge
loss of maidenhood	:	loss of virginity.
pampered	:	having fed on their blood.
swells	:	grows fat.
alas	:	because the beloved will not yield to him.
more than married	:	because their bloods are mingled in the fleawhich has, thus, become their "marriage bed"and "marriage temple."
though parents grudge	:	though her parents are hostile to their love affair.
cloistered	:	in the privacy of their marriage bed symbolized by the flea.
though use make you apt to herkill me	:	though she is used to killing him with coldness
self-murder	:	suicide.
sacrilege	:	sin
three sins killing thee	:	by killing the flea, the beloved will commit three sins : murder in killing the lover, suicidein killing herself, and sacrilegein killingthe flea.
sudden	:	rash
purpled thy nails	:	by killing the flea, the beloved has reddenedher nails with innocent blood.
will waste	:	will be lost.

1.6.3.2 The Sunne Rising

In this dramatic love song, Donne emphasizes the self sufficient and all- absorbing nature of love. The union of lovers embraces the entire cosmos and time past, present and future. It is for this reason that Coleridge regards the poem as an epitome of true vigorous evaluation of both – soul and body in full form. The poet and his sweetheart are lying in their bedroom and when the sun rises on the eastern horizon early in the morning, the lovers feel disturbed by the intrusion of the sun's rays through the windows and curtains of the room. The lover addresses the Sun as "busie old fool, unruly Sun" and asks him :

Why dost thou thus,

Through windows, and through curtains call on us? Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?

The Sun must know that lovers are not the slaves of time and changing seasons. Love exists independent of all laws, rules, conventions and movement of time. In fact, it transcends all earthly laws and the boundaries of time and space, for there is something divine about true Love :

Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,

Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

The poet tells the Sun to chide children for being late to school. Instead of interfering with the poet and his beloved, he should remind apprentices, courtiers, and farmers of their duties within specific periods of time. Thus, in the very opening stanza, the poet strikes a note of unconventionality. "The Sun" which Spenser and the other Elizabethan poets had so often described as "the golden eyes of heaven", "Hyperion", and "the glorious planet sol", is reduced by Donne to "busie old fool" and "Saucy pedantic wretch.' This is so because in his eyes, love is more important than anything else in the world. To quote Percy Marshall, "...the poet catches the sun, and addressing him as man to man, is playfully angry at his intrusion. He pictures the day's first activities of the boys who pass his windows on their way to school or work, and of the court which was the focal point and symbol of sixteenth century English life; he strips down the rigours of a time table; and he centres his attention on the thought of love."

The poet points out that the Sun has no reason to feel proud of its powerful and bright beams. If he so chooses, he can eclipse and cloud his brightness by closing his eyes. He would, however, not do so, for he cannot bear the thought of removing his eyes from the face of his beloved even for a moment. Her eyes are so dazzling that they are capable of blinding even the sun. The poet then juxtaposes his private world of love with the external world of geography, and says that the world of lovers is a microcosm of the outside world, because the dreams, imaginations and collective spiritual landscape of the lovers include within their bounds the kingdoms of kings and the glory, vastness and riches of the whole universe. The poet tells the Sun :-

Look, and tomorrow late, tell me, Whether both th'Indias of spice and mine Be where thou left'st them, or lie here with me. Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday, And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

She is all states and all Princes, I, Nothing else is.

This reminds us of Spenser's "Ammorertti" No. XV, which begins with a variant of the image Donne has used in his poem : "Why look in 'both the Indias for riches? They are all here in my love."

In the concluding stanza of the poem, Donne uses his favourite "all nothing antithesis", when he points out that the self and glory of the external world are insignificant as compared with the wealth and splendour of the world of love. The princes and kings merely imitate the poet and his sweetheart and try to be as happy as they are. But the fact is that they cannot

even dream of the wealth of romance; nor can they ever taste the bliss of love the poet and his sweetheart experience in their "lover-bower". Compared to the glory and profundity of love the worldly glory is mere mockery and all other kinds of wealth are trash. The poet argues that he is far richer and happier than the Sun because the latter is alone without a beloved. Again, the poet says that since the world of the lovers is all-inclusive, the Sun should, in future, shine on them alone, because in so doing, it will have done its duty which is to distribute his light and heat to the entire world. "This idea", says M.M. Mahood, "links naturally with the use of a circle imagery and so the lyric ends with the thought that the spheres of the visible world-order have been superseded by the equally spherical infinite, perfect and indestructible-world of love."

"The Sunne Rising" is characterized by structural unity and the various elements-the impudent address, the ingenious conceit that the Sun's journey farther away from the lovers bed-chamber is futile, and the idea that lovers concentrate within themselves the whole world-are fused into a perfect poetic pattern. The variety of tone is completely dissolved in symphony of love.

Therefore, Joan Bennet rightly believes that the poem is a "successful fusion of wit and passion."

Annotations and Explanatory Notes

Probably the idea of this poem was suggested to the poet by Ovid's *Amores*. But Donne has many original departures from *Amores*. It may also be noted that the idea contained in the later half of the second stanza of *"The Sunne Rising"* strongly resembles the thought of the second and the third stanzas of *"The Anniversary."*

Must thy motions lovers seasons run? : does the sun imagine that lovers are the slaves of changes caused by his movements. The idea is that lovers are not affected by the change of time and seasons.

Pedantic : conceited, showy because the sun displays its power.

Prentices : apprentices, or trainees who do not like to go to their work.

Court-huntsmen : courtiers who accompany the king when he goes out hunting.

Country ants : farmers and peasants who are very busy in their fields like ants.

Love all alike, no seasons knows : Love is unchangeable, constant.

The rags of time : the mere tattered clothing of time, or the shred (parts i.e. hours, days, months, years etc.) into which time is torn up and subdivided.

Revered : worthy of respect.

Winks : closes one's eyes for a short time.

Blinded : dazzled.

Both the Indias of spice and Mine : the East Indies and the West Indies respectively, famous for their spices and gold mines. It is interesting to note the contents of a letter from Donne to Sir Robert Carr : "Your way into Spain, was Eastward and that is the way to the land of perfumes and spices; their way hither to Westward, and that is their way to that of

gold of Myne."

'All here in one bed lay' : for the poet and his beloved, their bed-room is the whole world.

Play : imitate.
Mimic : a mockery.
Xalchemy : mere counterfeit.
Contracted : epitomized, the lover's room epitomizes the whole universe.

This bed thy centre is, the walls, thy sphere : The poet's bed is the centre of the Sun's orbit, and the walls of this room mark its orbit itself.

1.6.4 Self Check Exercise

1 Define Metaphysical Poetry.
2 Define Metaphysical concepts.

1.6.5 Summary

In this unit, we have discussed two major poems by the great metaphysical poet John Donne. John Donne as known for his metaphysical poetry. Such poetry is dramatic where a poet arts as a clever to prove his point. Flea is one of the most popular metaphysical poems in the history of English Literature.

1.6.6 Short Questions

1. How is the flea a symbol of love in the poem?
2. Justify the title *"The Flea".*
3. Write note on
   (a) Love and Donne
   (b) Elizabethan love poetry and Donne's love poetry.

1.6.7 Long Questions

1 Discuss 'The Flea' as a metaphysical poem.
2 Attempt a critical appreciation of The Sunne Rising by John Donne.

1.6.8 Suggested Readings

1 Alvarez, A : *The School of Donne.* London; Chatto and Windus, 1961.
2 Bush, Douglas : *English Literature in the Early Seventeenth Century.* Oxford University, Press. 1945.
3 Bush, Douglas : *English Poetry* : *The Main Currents.* London: Methuen, 1952, 1961.
4 Gardner, Helen (ed.) : *John Donne : A Collection of Critical Essays.* Prentice Hall, 1962.
5 Grierson, Herbert (ed.) : *The Poems of John Donne,* Oxford Univerity, Press, 1937-1960.
6 Gosse, Edmund : *Life and Letters of John Donne,* Vols. I & II. London, 1989.
7 Hammond. G : *The Metaphysical Poets* (A Casebook). London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1947.
8 Smith, A.J., (ed.) : *John Donne : The Critical Heritage.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.
9 Williamson, George : *A Reader's Guide to Metaphysical Poets.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1968.

Lesson No. 1.7 **Author : Dr. Sant Singh Bal**

Converted into SLM by Ms. Paramjeet Kaur
Last updated October, 2023

JOHN DONNE : A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE PRESCRIBED POEMS-II

1.7.1 Objectives

- To discuss the Valediction: Forbidding Mourning as a metaphysical poem.
- To trace various important metaphysical concepts in the poem.

1.7.2 Introduction

This unit shall focus on another major literary achievement by John Donne. Undoubtedly, John Donne is amongst the most important metaphysical poets; This poem shall focus on one of his most popular poem named The Valediction: Forbidding Mourning. We shall study various aspects that make it a metaphysical poem.

1.7.3 A Critical Study of the Prescribed Poems-II

1.7.3.1 Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

In tone, *Valediction : Forbidding Mourning* is identical to the Song- "Sweetest love, I do not go." It is probably for this reason that Grierson thinks that the two poems were written at the same time. At the most obvious level, the poem is a set of propositions supported by argument from analogy. It is addressed by Donne to his wife, Anne More, on the occasion of his departure for France with Sir Robert Drury. The first three stanzas amplify the main idea "let our parting be peaceful." The poet advises his wife not to feel sad when he bids her farewell while leaving for France. He wishes the parting to be peaceful as the death of a virtuous person is inconspicuous as the supposed "trepidation of the sphere."

This is followed by the argument advanced in support of the basic idea of the poem, that is, true love is independent of physical senses, and other worldly bonds which are regarded as essential for the union of two

lovers. Donne points out that earthly lovers whose love feeds on senses find it difficult to endure the absence of the object which acted as a sort of fuel to keep fire of love burning. But that sorrounds it. They are sure only of their spiritual union. "Inter-assured of the mind", they attach no importance to the sensuous aspect of their love. It logically follows therefore, that even when they are physically separated, their union will *remain intact.*

Our two souls therefore, which are one. Though I must go, endure not yet

A breach, but an expansion, Like gold to aery thinness beat.

Thus, in his going away, their love will expand like finely beaten gold and cover large landscape of their spiritual geography. The conceit of gold beaten to "aery thinness" is very important because through it the poet tries to prove that true love does not break, but undergoes an expansion. Spiritual love, like gold, is infinitely precious and elastic. A tearful farewell will vulgarise their love by revealing mystery of their private paradise to the jealous and callous world. In other words, to be demonstrative would profane their love.

Annotations and Explanatory Notes

Pass mildly away - die peacefully.

The breath goes now - the friends and relatives of a dying man mourn when he is about to breathe his last.

Move - stir up.

Profanation - desecration of something sacred or the degradation or vulgarisation of something worthy of being held in reverence.

Laity - layman, common people (as against the Clergy)

Waving of the earth - earthquakes.

Brings - causes. *Men reckon what it did and meant* - People try to calculate the damage the earthquake has done and they estimate its significance in human affairs. It may be pointed out that in Donne's time, earthquakes were generally regarded as evidence of the wrath of God.

Trepidation of the spheres - In Donne's time there were three current meanings of the term 'trepidation' : (1) tremulous agitation (applying to persons);

(2) 'tremor' (applying to things); and (3) in astronomical sense, which O.E.D. describes as follows: "A liberation of the eight (or ninth) sphere, added to the system of Ptolemy by the Arab astronomer, Thabet ben Korrah, c. 950, in order to account for certain phenomena, really due to the motion of the earth's axis. This liberation was harmless (innocent) in the sense that no harmful effect or portentious significance had ever been attributed to it.

Sublunary - ' earthly' and therefore, inferior. Also subject to change like

everything below the moon ('sublunary means below the moon').

Whose soul is sense - whose whole essence is sensuality or whose soul depends on the properties of sensation.

Admit - stand, bear.

Elemented it - the elements of which sublunary love was made.

Inter - assured of the mind – mutually confident of the fidelity of each other's minds. But the term "inter-assured" also refers to a solemn legal assurance.

Endure not yet - nevertheless do not suffer any break in their love of each other.

Expansion - just as gold expands on being beaten, similarly, the love between Donne and his wife will expand to cover a large area of their life when the poet goes away to France.

Airy thinness - thin like air.

Twin Compasses - the two legs of a compass. *Makes no show to move* - does not seem to move. *but doth* - But in fact, does move.

If the other do - If the either foot moves.

In the centre sit - just as the fixed foot of the compass remains at the centre, so also the beloved would stay at home.

hearkens - calls, leans towards.

That - that the other foot.

If we read lines 32 and 36 together, skipping for a moment the lines that come in between, we at once know that the poet here refers to the completion of the circle.

Obliquely run - refers to the fact that the describing arm follows a curved path not a straight line.

makes - this word suggests fulfilment.

1.7.4 Self Check Exercise

1 Attempt a critical appreciation of The valediction: Forbidding Mourning.

2 Discuss the Valediction as a metaphysical poem.

1.7.5 Summary

Finally, the poet says that if their souls are two, they are like the two legs of compass. Thus, parting is related both to body and soul, which serves to "define earthly and heavenly love." If the lovers' soul is one, they are not subject to separation; if they are two, they would still be united by a fine spiritual thread. Hence, his departure from home is not an occasion for mourning. The lover may go away for a short period; but if the beloved is sincere and faithful to him, he is bound to return, just as the moving leg of the compass returns to the fixed foot after completing the circle. In the words of A.J. Smith : "The subject of this poem is a metaphysical problem of the lovers even when they are separated. It is in this very respect in which they are separated, that he wishes to show that lovers are

united. The souls are one substance, which have not only the invisibility of air, but also the obvious unity of a lamp of gold. It is to stress that last point that the compasses are brought in. For gold, though originally solid, falls under suspicion of being likely to vanish away, has been compared to air. Compasses do not vanish they have not remotest connection either with physical or metaphysical subtlety. Hence, once, the needful subtlety has been expounded, they close the poem and symbolize it not, however, by their oddity." Again, the poem is metaphysical in intent because here argument, logical structure and the basic idea are woven into a beautiful design in which logic and poetry have been perfectly harmonized.

Thus the poet has transmuted a real event in his life into a piece of art. Obliquely, Donne recognizes the influence that a woman exerts on man. The fact that the poem is addressed to Donne's wife does not, in any way, alter the artistic objective character of the poem.

1.7.6 Short Questions

1. What is the basic theme of "Valediction : Forbidding Mourning?"
2. Comment on the dramatic element in Donne's poetry?
3. Comment briefly on Donne's "Valediction" poems?

1.7.7 Long Questions

1. Discuss the theme of the poem Valediction-Forbidding Mourning.
2. Comment on the metaphysical concepts in the poem The Valediction.

1.7.8 Suggested Readings

1. Alvarez, A : *The School of Donne.* London; Chatto and Windus, 1961.
2. Bush, Douglas : *English Literature in the Early Seventeenth Century.* Oxford University, Press. 1945.
3. Bush, Douglas : *English Poetry* : *The Main Currents.* London: Methuen, 1952, 1961.
4. Gardner, Helen (ed.) : *John Donne : A Collection of Critical Essays.* Prentice Hall, 1962.
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9. Williamson, George : *A Reader's Guide to Metaphysical Poets.* London: Thames and Hudson, 1968.

Lesson No. 1.8 **Author : Dr. Sant Singh Bal**

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(A) John Donne as a Metaphysical Poet

(B) John Donne as a Poet of Love

1.8.1 Objectives

- The aim is to introduce John Donne as a metaphysical poet.
- To study John Donne as a poet of love.
- To apprise students with all important features of John Donne's poetry.

1.8.2 Introduction

This unit aims to discusses John Donne as a metaphysical poet in detail and also how he happens to be a love poet.

1.8.3 Donne as a Metaphysical poet

In the full and real sense of the term, Metaphysical Poetry is a poetry which like that of *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* has been inspired by philosophical and theological concepts of the role assigned to the human soul in the great drama of existence. Donne and Milton were able to write these poems because they were inspired by a definite interpretation of God's creation and its ultimate purpose. It may be pointed out that Donne did not write metaphysical poetry like Dante and Milton, or like his contemporaries, John Davies and Fulke Greville. He has not expounded any coherent system of thought. In fact, feeling, not philosophy, is the primary concern in his poetry. J.B. Leishman says that despite the fact that Donne draws analogies and metaphors from the realm of philosophy, theology and science. He is not a metaphysical poet in the proper sense of being a philosophical one. He adds that what most readers have in mind when they call him metaphysical poet is generally "syllogistic argumentativeness which might be more appropriately called scholastic, or

dialectical strain."

However, it is difficult to believe that Donne was indifferent to the truth of the philosophical propositions he employed. If we examine the theme of his poetry, it may be called metaphysical in the ordinary sense of the word, for Donne is one of the greatest religious Poets in the whole range of English Poetry. He broods on death, examines the nature of sin and the relationship of human soul with God. His religious poetry is rooted in the soul of Christian Faith. In his middle years, no doubt, his subtle self tormenting mind was in a flux, his faith corroded by the scepticism and neo-paganism of the Renaissance Schoolmen and shattered by the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo, so that in the "Second Anniversary", he concluded that the world, physical and moral, was sunk in corruption in which human reason was scarcely effective. In the "La Corona" sonnet, Donne expounds the doctrines of the Catholic Faith while "The Litanie" is one of the most intensely Anglican of his religious poems.

He is the first of the "Anglo-Catholic poets" and the first personal religious poet in the whole range of English poetry, expressing not only the collective Christian consciousness but also the conflicts and longings of troubled individual soul. In the words of Grierson : "Donne is metaphysical not only by virtue of his scholasticism, but by his power of argumentation, and his deep interest in the experience of the objects."

Donne's religious and philosophical poems deal with life and death and corruption of the world. 'The Anniversary' reflects many aspects of the poet's contemporary philosophy and sensibility, besides being an authentic expression of Donne's personal speculation, melancholy and scepticism. However, Donne's chief power as religious poet is expressed in the Holy Sonnets and last hymns. The best of his Sonnets and hymns are characterized by doubt and fear and express the poet's spiritual struggles and conflicts with unique force. "Holy Sonnet I" shows how the poet finds himself in the grip of the Devil and when he is allowed to look towards God, he rises in spirit, but the Devil tempts him again. Only God's grace can rescue him,

Only thou art above, and when towards thee By thy leave I can look, I rise again;

But our old subtle foe so tempteth me, That not one hour I can myself sustain:

Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art, And thou like adamant draw mine iron heart.

In his essay, "Religion and Literature", T.S. Eliot says that there is a kind of religious poet who seems to be "Leaving out what men consider

their major passions and thereby confessing his ignorance of them." Donne does not confess any such ignorance, and religion finally becomes much more disturbing to him than even the question of moral virtues. In Holy Sonnets he deals with the Resurrection and Judgement in Ezekiel. Sonnet– VIII is considered the evidence of his spiritual state as it relates to angels and men. In Holy Sonnet– IX, the poet asks why man is subject to damnation. In depth of passionate feelings the Holy Sonnet may be compared to the Sonnet of Michelangelo, or with the religious feelings in the work of Dostoevsky.

Thus, the question of life and death, sin and redemption and immortality of the human soul and its relations with God constitute the heart of the matter in Donne's religious poetry. It may be added that religious poets of the 11th century who follow him have inherited the metaphysics of the Church. At the same time, it may be noted that Donne does not regard this world as prison. His anti-mystical bias, his concentration on "a daily beauty" and sanctification of ordinary life in "The Litanie" clearly show it. To quote Helen Gardner : "He did not look to religion for an ecstasy of the spirit which would suffice the memory of the ecstasy of the flesh; but for an 'evenness' of piety which would preserve him from despair."

However, more than the content of Donne's poetry, it is characteristic style of the poet which invited Dryden's comment that Donne "Affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires but in amorous verse, where Nature only should reign "

His poetry is personal and introspective. Critics like Oscar Williams point out that besides including the religious aspect of the poet's psyche, metaphysical poetry refers to the temperamental predisposition which drives a poet to write the way he does. They think that "the purtian Emily Dickinson, the Jesuit Victorian Gerard Manely Hopkins or the heterodox Dylan Thomas seem closer to Donne. In Donne's early poetry we see that ideas and intellect derive the poetic imagery in a language that is in a way, supple and ambivalent. For instance sometimes Donne uses new philosophy to explain some moral or theological ideas. The new astronomy is relevant, because it is logical and understandable that we shall move towards God, not He to us. The Roman Church is likened to Copernicanism, as it ''hath carried earth further up from the stupid Centre'' and carried heaven far higher.

Donne's poetry is loaded with conceits. A conceit is a far-fetched comparison. Dr. Johnson defines a conceit as the perception of "occult resemblances in things apparently unlike." The metaphysical conceits grow out of the intellectual process of thinking in terms of figures. Conceits were also used by Elizabethan writers, but the Elizabethan conceits differ

from the Metaphysical conceits. While the former employed them for ornamentation, Donne and his followers used them as means of revealing their wit and learning. Donne often employs a device which is characteristically "metaphysical", the elaboration of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it. He has remarkable power of perceiving relations between different levels of experience and intensity. Thus, in his poem, "The Sun Rising", the poet displays his metaphysical wit when he expresses his contempt for the sun. The poet also employs extravagant conceits in glorifying the sweetheart. Addressing the Sun, he says: Look and tomorrow late; tell me

Whether both the Indias of spice and mine
Be where thou left'st them or lie here with me.

In "Valediction : Forbidding Mourning", the two lovers are compared to the legs of a compass. Normally, such a simile is not used to describe the relationship of the two lovers. Again in "The Flea", the poet argues that since the flea has sucked his blood and that of his beloved, the insect becomes a meeting point of their bodies, "the temple of their wedding:" Clearly, the use of the metaphysical conceits makes Donne's poetry highly intellectual.

Donne's poetry is characterized by dramatic element, wit and a talking voice; for example the poem, "The Canonization" opens thus:-

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love

In "The Good Morrow", the poet begins on a note of witty surprise : I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I

Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then But sucked on country pleasure. Childishly?

Sometimes, the soul of Donne in his lyrics, as in "The Relic", divides against itself and the resultant situations are highly dramatic. More important still is the effect produced on the speaking character-as in "The Flea"-by the presence of a listening one whom he tries to win over. In "The Dream", the beloved comes in when the lover is dreaming of her. The man pays her a highly metaphysical compliment : In God, being and intelligence are one,

Thou are so truth, that thoughts of thee suffice, To make dreams truth; and fables histories.

In his *Donne,* the *Craftsman*, Pierre Legouis draws our attention to Donne's extreme originality and to the pervasiveness of dramatic element in his poetry. The dramatic technique used by Donne was later adopted to his own purpose, by Robert Browning.

Another quality which distinguished Donne's poetry as metaphysical is his display of learning. In his poetry, we come across obscure and

recondite allusions and references, and this vast learning assumes such a subtle shapein the crucible of his imagination that it becomes extremely difficult for a reader to follow what the poet really intends to say. To quote Grierson: "Donne was not a conscious reviver of Dante, but to the game of elaborating fantastic conceits and hyperboles (which was the fashion throughout Europe) he brought not only full blooded temperament and acute mind, but a vast and glowing store of the same scholiastic learning. In fact, a degree of heterogeneity of learning compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's genius is omnipresent in Donne's poetry."

Finally, Donne is the first poet to subject emotion to intellectual analysis; but the emotion does not fly at the touch of cold logic. There is perfect blending of thought and feeling in his poetry. Moreover, his poems develop along the lines of logical arguments; the poet examines a feeling, its ramifications and seeks to throw light on it by viewing it from the new and unexpected angles and by finding connection between it and its intellectual concepts. Sometimes intellectual concepts themselves generate feeling. T.S. Eliot has rightly observed that "a thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility", and that "the intellect was at the top of the senses."

To sum up, Donne is a 'metaphysical' poet both in point of content and style. Here is variety enough to epitomize his age and yet in all his work there is the halo of mystery that surrounds Donne.

1.8.4 Donne as a Poet of Love

Shakespeare, Sidney and Spenser are the most outstanding representatives of love in the Elizabethan age. In their hands, the medieval courtly love or romance of adultery is transmuted into an equally romantic love that looks to marriage as its natural conclusion. The Elizabethan love poetry is written on a convention which, though used with manliness and full sincereity by some of the poets, does not escape the fate of its kind. Dante's love for Beatrice, Petrarch's love for Laura, the gallant and passionate adoration of Sidney for Stella, become the mode for imaginary woes. "There are few themes" says Mario Praz, "more harped on by sixteenth century poets than the time honoured one of the love-dreams." He adds that the basic formula that governs the themes of Elizabethan love poetry amounts to this : The poet dreams that his cruel beloved has suddenly melted and come to console him and shower her love on him, just when he is about to enjoy the "godsend", sleep forsakes him. These poets used the same terms and wrote in fixed strains, epicurean and sensuous like Ronsard, ideal and intellectual like Dante, sentimental and adorning like Petrarch. They give a highly glorified conception to ideal love. They give the status of a goddess to the woman. The lover not only admires his sweetheart, but promises her an immortality of

fame to be secured through the magic touch of verse.

But Donne's treatment of love is entirely unconventional. From the enclosed garden of Elizabethan sentiment, Donne burst out passionately and rudely pulling up "the gay coloured tangled weeds that choked thoughts" and plants the seeds of new flowers. Whereas his forerunners and contemporaries had been idealist, epicurean and sentimental, he is a realist. He can be resolutely free from illusion and begin a poem as:

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love.

Again, he does not admire the physical beauty, long hair, rosy cheeks and red lips of his sweet-heart. He dwells exclusively on the emotion of love and not on what rouses it. For instance, in "The Blossoms", the physical charm of his beloved is hinted at only obliquely. In this respect too, he differs from the Elizabethan poets who give us detailed and vivid pictures of the physical beauty of woman.

The chief characteristic of Donne's love poetry is the joy of mutual passion. In the words of Grierson : 'Other poets have done many things which Donne could not do. They have invested their feelings with a garb of richer and sweeter poetry. They have felt deeply the reverence which is the heart of love. But it is only in the fragments of Sapho, the lyrics of Catullus, and the song of Burns that one will find the sheer joy of loving and being loved expressed in the same direct and simple language as in some of Donne's songs. It is only in Browning that one will find the same simplicity of feeling combined with a swift and subtle dialectic :

I wonder by my troth what thou and I Did till we loved.

Donne openly declares that he will follow Nature and pluck his rose or roses; for love's sweetest and most beautiful part is variety. He says that in the good old days, before civilization dominated humanity, things were very different. In "Elegy, XVII", the poet writes:

How happy were our Syres in ancient times who held plurality of loves, no crime !

.....

But since this title honour hath been us'd Our weake credulity hath been abus'd; The golden laws of nature repealed.....

But at the bottom, Donne is more intellectual than emotional and his love lyrics are poems of transcendental sensuality, highly intellectualized. His love poetry is not so simple a thing of the heart, or the senses as that of some of the romantic poets in Europe. On the contrary, his amorous poetry is remarkable for realism, psychological penetration and for the range and variety of mood. The songs and sonnets and the Elegies contain Donne's strange treatment of love. He rejects the cult of woman worship. To Donne, woman is no goddess, she is desirable indeed but not adorable,

although no poet has at times used the language of adoration more daringly to express the feeling and the moment. The poet presents her fickleness and treacherous character. She is devoid of faith and virtue because she has learnt the evil art "to be more than one in a bed." In his early poems, written before his marriage the poet was a bitter cynic mocking at womanhood contemptuously. In his "Song", the poet says that man may do any number of impossible things; he may go and catch a falling star, he may get with child a mandrake root, and even find out where all the past years are, but he will not be able to find a woman who is sincere and true :

If thou be'est borne to strange sights, Things invisible to see,

Ride ten thousand days and nights, Till age snow white hair on thee,

Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me All strange wonders that befell thee, And swear

No where
Lives a woman true, and fair.

However, this is only a temporary phase in the poet's attitude towards love and woman. In the love lyric, addressed to his wife, Anne More, Donne sings of the joys of conjugal love while in his later love poetry, he introduces a Platonic strain, and poems like "Twickram Garden", "The Funeral". "The Blossoms" and "The Princess" are characterized by the platonic strain. But less artificial and more realistic than his last strain is the feeling of those poems in which the poet glorifies conjugal love. To this category belongs the fine 'Song" :

Sweetest love, I do not go, For wearinesse of thee,

Not in hope the world can show A fitter love for me;

In "The Ecstasy", he develops a concept of love consonant with his later religious thought and the interdependence of soul and body. Knowing what we do of Donne's private life, we can easily conclude that it was the love of Anne More that turned the wild gallant into the devoted husband who could declare:

Let not thy dividing heart Forethink me any ill, Destiny may take thy part And may thy fears fulfil, But think that we

Are but turn'd aside to sleep; They who one another keep Alive, ne'er parted be.

Probably, it was Anne More's death or thought of her death, that inspired the creation of the sublime poem "Nocturnal upon St. Lucie's Day."

However, Donne has a definite philosophy of love. For instance in many of the poems in *Songs and Sonnets* he juxtaposes the fickleness of woman and with the mystical identity of the souls of lovers.

Donne glorified not only the romantic relationship between two

unmarried lovers and bliss of conjugal love, but he also draws our attention to the fact that love flourishes even outside the charmed circle of wedlock. He believes that spontaneity and mutual attraction are the touchstones of love as has rightly been pointed out by Joan Bennet, "Donne's love poetry is not about the difference between marriage and adultery, but about the difference between lust and love." C.S. Lewis traces three levels of sentiments in Donne's love poetry. "First there is the celebration of simple sexual appetite, as in Elegie XIV. The poem may be called pornographic to the extent that it is intended to arouse the appetite, it describes : Although it is difficult to specify the condition under which the reading of this poem would be an innocent act, it contains nothing intrinsically evil and cannot be condemned as something immoral. In the second category fall those poems in which the poet glorifies love as a god who loves his "clergy". Sometimes, he personifies the qualities of his mistress, the "enormous grant", her disdain and the "enchantress honor." A few poems such as "The Good Morrow" and "The Anniversary" express spontaneous and "delighted" love. But the large majority of these poems centre round the five things.

(a) the sorrow of parting-" Sweetest love, I do not go."
(b) the miseries of secrecy-the Sixteenth "Elegy".
(c) the treachery of the mistress-" Go and catch a Falling Star."
(d) the fickleness of the lover-" Love's Usuary" and
(e) contempt for love itself-" A Lecture Upon the Shadow".

The highest level of sentiment is represented by the poems of ostentatiously virtuous love, such as "The Undertaking", "Valediction : Forbidding Mourning", etc. In the poems of this category, Donne is at once passionate and innocent.

1.8.5 Self Check Exercise

1 Discuss John Donne as a love poet.
2 Discuss John Donne as a religious poet.

1.8.6 Summary

Thus, Donne deals with love in all its forms. His love poems would interest humanity for their truth because the passions such as he presents are permanent part of human experience. In the words of Grierson : "Donne's genius, temperament and learning gave to his love poems certain qualities which immediately arrested attention and have given them a power at once fascinating and disconcerting, despite the faults of phrasing and harmony, which obscure, and outweigh their poetic worth." Donne's influence as a poet of love can be seen on the seventeenth century poets. Almost every element of Donne-except of course, his metrical ruggedness-appears in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress". The grimness of content and the argumentative quality of the following conceit seems to have come

directly from Donne :

Worms shall try,
That long preserved virginit.

1.8.7 Short questions

1 What is the theme of "The Good Morrow"?

2 How the sun cannot *affect* the lives of the lovers in "The Sunne Rising"?

1.8.8 Long questions

1 Discuss Donne as a metaphysical poet with special reference to the poems you have studied.

2 ''Donne is a Modern Poet.'' Comment, giving details of Donne's attitude toward the subject of love.

3 Write a detailed essay on Donne as a writer of *Elegies* with special reference to his Holy Sonnets.

1.8.9 Suggested Readings

10. Alvarez, A : *The School of Donne.* London; Chatto and Windus, 1961.

11. Bush, Douglas : *English Literature in the Early Seventeenth Century.* Oxford University, Press. 1945.

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