

The Age of Chaucer

Background Information

- 1340/1300-1400
- Age of transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.
- Remarkable social, political and religious changes.
- English was now gaining shape in the works of Chaucer, Langland and Wycliffe.

The Hundred Years War

- 1337-1453
- A series of wars between France and England.
- In France, with the death of Philip IV and his sons, Edward III showed interest in the French throne because he was Philip IV's grandson by his mother Isabella.
- The French nobility rejected his claim over the throne and wished Philip IV's nephew Philip of Valois to take over.
- After episodes of unsatisfactory settlements between the two countries, a series of wars was fought between them-
 1. Edwardian Era War (1337-1360)
 2. Caroline War (1369-1389)
 3. Lancastrian War (1415-1453)
- France won the major wars, but both the nations emerged as strong nations in Europe.

- To compensate war expenses, taxes were increased in England, leading to wide unrest.

The Black Death

- 1348-1350
- Bubonic plague
- Killed more than 4 million people over Europe.
- Caused by bacterium *Yersinia pestis* spread via wild rodents.
- Killed 30-40% of English population.
- The loss of population led to a higher demand for the labor.
- The laborers now were at an advantageous position to choose the work with higher income. They often moved to get better wages.
- More and more poorly qualified people took up various new jobs. These people cared less about the church and more about themselves.
- This led to a decline in the church authority and an increase in Renaissance spirit (individualism).

The Peasant's Revolt

- 1381
- 3rd time in 4 years poll tax was imposed.
- Everyone over the age of 15 had to pay one shilling.
- Due to wars and the plague, people were already under economic distress.
- They chose not to pay the tax, which led to serious official investigations against them.

- A royal tax commissioner, John Bampton, was attacked during one of his investigations when he reached the Essex village of Fobbing in May 1381. He was thrown out of the village.
- This revolt spread from village to village under the leadership of Wat Tyler.
- Wat Tyler marched towards London with the rebels and explained to the king his demands.
- This meeting led to a second one, during which Tyler was killed.
- This led to the end of the revolt.
- Other demands of Tyler and the revolutionaries- freedom from serfdom, free pardon of all offences committed during the rebellion, no upper limit on wages and free contract.

John Gower

- He was a court poet of the 14th century.
- Friends with Chaucer who calls him “Moral Gower” in his dedication to *Troilus and Cressid*.
- He is considered more typical of his age than Chaucer because he is more conservative, technical and moralistic with his writing.
- Wrote in 3 languages- Latin, French and English.

His works

1. Miroir de l’Omme or Speculum Meditantis

- Began writing in about 1376.
- Written in French.

- It is a long sermon in verse.
- It is a manual of sins and sinners with an account of how the vices of the day have corrupted the man.
- Virtues, Repentance and invocation to Virgin Mary will save the soul of the man.

2. Vox Clamantis

- Written in 1385.
- “the voice of one crying out”.
- A dream allegory.
- Written in Latin.
- Based on the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381.
- In this poem he draws a moral analysis of the social decay and corruption prevalent in the contemporary society and denounces them vehemently.
- Though he does not align himself with the popular cause, he still makes a moral appeal to the high people in power to choose the way of God and act in right authority.

3. Confessio Amantis

- Published in 1389.
- 33,000 Octosyllabic lines.

Written at the request of King Richard II, who requested to read “som newe thing” in English.

- Dedication 1st version: Richard II.
- Dedication in a later version: Henry of Derby, the future King Henry IV.
- It translates into “*The Lover’s Confession*”.

- In this poem Gower, rather reluctantly, gives up morality for love and entertainment-

“For thilke cause, if that ye rede,

I wolde go the middel wey

And write a boke betwene the tway

Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore”

- The narrative opens on a conventional May morning.
- An ageing lover, Amans, goes to the woods and approaches Venus, Goddess of Love. Venus asks Amans to make confession to her priest, Genius, a figure inspired from French Poem Roman de la Rose (a dream allegory by Guillaume de Lorris).
- But before Amans makes his confession, Genius tells him stories of the seven deadly sins so that Amans could judge if he is guilty and could confess accordingly.
- After the long series of tales, Amans makes his confession.
- But Venus mocks Amans for being too old to love and advises him to stick to the path of morality.
- At the end, Amans is cured of his love and recovers his reason- Christian theme.
- The work is written in 8 books with tales from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the Bible.

William Langland

- The last great English poet to write in Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse.
- Little is known about his own life.
- The ascribed author of *Piers Plowman*.

Piers Plowman

- *The Vision of Williams Concerning Piers the Plowman.*
- Allegorical poem in unrhymed alliterative verse.
- It is a social satire on the 14th century's ecclesiastical corruption.
- It idealizes simple Christian life and honest labor as the purest form of life. It sympathizes with the poor.

Its 3 main versions have been found, distinguished by Dr. Skeat-

- Version A- written around 1362
- Version B- 1377
- Version C- 1398

Only the first version is purely ascribed to Langland. The later two versions have elements added by other writers as well.

The poem begins with a Prologue; it is divided into various Visions, subdivided into various Passus.

- A man named Will, falls asleep on a May morning by a brook on the Malvern Hill and sees a vision or dream of "a faire felde ful of folke"- a scene bustling with all kinds of honest and dishonest people.
- Plowman, wasters, hermits, merchants, jesters, beggars, pilgrims, friars, pardoners, King etc.
- The protagonist is Piers, an honest and hardworking plowman.
- The poem then runs through a series of Passus and visions.
- The later two versions of the poem have the additional characters of Dowel (Do well), Dobet (Do better) and Dobest (Do best).

- Like Canterbury Tales, Piers Plowman draws on the social classes and its representatives of the contemporary society and handles the social issues of the day with dexterity.

Geoffrey Chaucer

- He lived through 3 kings-
 1. Born: Edward III
 2. Wrote: Richard II
 3. Died: Henry IV
- He fought in the 100 years war and traveled to France, Spain and Italy.
- His poetry also had major French and Latin influences.

French Phase

- His early works were grounded in French poetic tradition and court culture.
- He was particularly inspired by *Roman de la Rose*.
- Works- *The Romaunt of the Rose*, *ABC (The Prayer of Our Lady)* and *The Book of the Duchess*., which he wrote on the request of John of Gaunt for the memorial of his wife Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster.

Italian phase

- From 1370 onwards, his works found inspiration from Latin works.
- Particularly influenced by Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio.

- Works- *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Legend of Good Women* and the translation of *De consolation philosophiae*.

English phase

- Considered as Chaucer's mature phase in literary creation.
- Works- *The Canterbury Tales*.

Famous quotes for Chaucer

- American poet Robert Lowell- "found his native tongue a dialect and left it a language".
- Matthew Arnold- "the father of our splendid English poetry".
- William J. Long- Calls *Canterbury Tale's* Prologue as "the prologue to modern fiction"- for its characterization, vividness and realism.
- SD Neil- Calls *Troilus and Criseyde* "a novel in verse".
- In the 1st version of *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower claims that Chaucer composed "ditees and songes glad".
- John Lydgate tries to emulate Chaucer's heroic couplets in his poem *The Siege of Thebes*.
- In its prologue he even tries to adopt the narrative framework of *the Canterbury Tales*. Lydgate as a pilgrim-narrator in the work meets Chaucer's pilgrims at their inn at Canterbury.

Important sources and influences

Boccaccio

- *Troilus and Criseyde*- *Il Filostrato*.
- *The Knight's Tale*- *Il Teseida*.

- The Franklin's Tale- *Il Filocolo*.
- The Clerk's Tale- *Patient Griselda*, last tale of Decameron.
- The Monk's Tale's subtitle- "*De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*" (It is the inspiration for Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes*).

Virgil

- *The House of Fame*- The dreaming poet sees the tale of *Aeneid* written on the walls of the Temple of Venus.

Ovid

- The tale of Philomela in *The House of Fame*- Book 8 of *Metamorphoses* and *Ovide Moralise* (A 14th century French translation of *Metamorphoses*).
- The Book of Duchess- The story of Ceyx and Alycone from Book 9 of *Metamorphoses*.

Boethius- a Latin senator & philosopher

- Chaucer translated his *De consolazione philosophiae* (AD 523) from Latin to Middle English as *Boece*.
- In the original work, the allegorical figure Philosophia enters into a conversation with Boethius and explains to him the importance of Philosophy in the life of man to rise him into a state of enlightenment.
- It became one of the most important philosophical tracts of Philosophy in the Middle English period.

Works

The Romaunt of the Rose

- Allegorical poem.
- Translation of one of the most famous secular works of the Middle Ages, *Le Roman de la Rose* (13th century), by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun.
- Written in octosyllabic verse.
- Only 1/3rd of the original is translated.
- It is translated in 3 fragments- A, B and C.
- Though only A is typically ascribed to Chaucer, C also closely resembles Chaucer's style of writing as both A and C are written in the London dialect.
- In a dream vision, the narrator enters the Garden of Mirth and sees various allegorized figures.
- The first half (A) by Lorris has the instructions of the God of Love to the poet- his love symbolized by the Rose.
- Part B by Meun satirizes the hypocrisy of Religion in the contemporary society. The allegorical figure of Jealousy also appears here.
- His views particularly on women attracted some criticism.
- Part C has the confession of Fals-semlant (false seeming), his going to the fortress of Jealousy and purging Wikked-tunge, the gatekeeper of the fortress, of his sins.

The Book of the Duchess

- It was written in 1369.
- A dream allegory.
- 1334 lines.

- As an elegy on the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, wife of John of Gaunt.
- Octosyllabic verse form.
- The poet falls asleep while reading the story of Ceyx and Alcyone (*Metamorphoses*).
- In the dream he meets a knight in black who laments the loss of his lady love. He describes her virtues, beauty and their courtship. She is now dead.
- Suddenly, a hunting party appears, the clock strikes 12 and the poet wakes up to find the book still in his hand.

The Legend of Good Women

- Written between 1372-1386.
- A dream vision.
- Written in Heroic couplet (first attested use by Chaucer).
- Prologue + 9 stories; Prologue is more admired.
- Important sources- Ovid's *Heroides*, Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* and *Vitae Vitorium et Feminarum Illustrium*.
- The prologue is written in two parts-
 1. The opening lines are in praise of daisy flower, conforming to the poetic tradition of French poetry Marguerite poems by Guillaume de Machaut.
 2. The sleeping poet is rebuked by Cupid, the God of Love, for writing ill of women (in his Troilus and Criseyde).
 3. Queen Alcestis, the queen of Thrace, suggests Chaucer that he writes a book in praise of women and their fidelity in love as an act of atonement.
 4. Chaucer is able to recount tales of loving and faithful women from history and legends- Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle,

Medea, Lucrece, Philomela, Phyllis, Hypermnestra and Ariadne.

- Unfinished work.

An ABC (The Prayer of our Lady)

- A close translation of a French prayer “*The Pilgrimage of Human Life*” written in allegorical verse.
- Survives in 16 manuscripts.
- Written in praise of Virgin Mary .
- Form- Acrostic- Each stanza begins with a Latin alphabet in sequence. Each stanza evokes a different symbol over the length of the poem.
- Chaucer describes the qualities and aspects of Virgin Mary in almost sensual details, blurring the line between Marian poetic tradition and courtly poetic tradition.

The House of Fame

- Between 1374-1385 Oxford; 1379-1380 Wiki.
- Unfinished dream poem.
- Written in 3 books of octosyllabic couplets.
- 2158 lines (over 2000).
- The Book begins with a Prologue on dreams. The God of Sleep is invoked.
- In Book I, the poet falls asleep and in a dream vision finds himself in a Temple of Glass dedicated to Venus. Here he finds the story of Aeneid inscribed on the walls .
- In Book II, the poet sees an eagle, who tells him that Jove has decided to send him to the House of Fame, through which he can become his guide.

- In this book, the eagle explains to the poet in philosophical tone all the arbitrary ways in which fame functions.
- In Book III, the eagle departs and the poet enters in the House of Fame where he sees all kinds of figures from Biblical and Classical lore.
- Eolus blows a trumpet to summon all the figures so that they can introduce themselves (from Dante's *Divina Comedia*).
- Now, the poet meets goddess Fame.
- Towards the end of the poem, many other allegorical figures appear but the description is left unfinished.
- The poem can be read as an autobiographical account on poetic creation.

The Parliament of Fowls

- 1382-1386.
- To celebrate the wedding of King Richard II with Anne of Bohemia in 1382.
- Dream vision.
- Rhyme royal- ABABBCC in iambic pentameter.
- Uses Beast Fable tradition.
- An example of "occasional poetry".
- Conference of birds to choose their mates on the St. Valentine's Day.
- In the Prologue, the poet is seen reading Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*. He laments that he does not have what he wants and he has what he does not want.

- As he falls asleep, he sees a dream vision in which he sees Goddess Nature.
- He is led to the Temple of Venus where a parliament of birds enter into a debate on the right way to choose one's mate.
- While 3 eagles support courtly love tradition, the duck supports his claim on a more pragmatic approach to courtship (recognized in the poem as bourgeois).
- The debate remains unresolved and the birds decide to gather here again a year later.

Troilus and Criseyde

- Written in around 1380s.
- It is his longest complete poem- 8239 lines of Rhyme Royal.
- Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*'s 8 books are turned into 5.
- Story revolves around the tragic love story of the Trojan prince Troilus and the beautiful widow Criseyde.
- Criseyde's father turns his loyalty from Trojan side to the Greek.
- In exchange of a couple of prisoners, Criseyde is to be returned to her father in the Greek camp. She promises Troilus that she will return to him.
- However, in the Greek camp she meets Diomedes, a Greek escort and proves disloyal to Troilus.
- Chaucer deepens the psychological aspect of the tale by introducing the character of Pandarus, Criseyde's uncle.
- He also has Criseyde written a mysterious, deep and psychologically intense character . Her long deliberations with her uncle in Book II are notably one of the most worthy parts of the work.

- Chaucer is, though, never contemptuous of Criseyde's unfaithfulness; he explores her psychology artistically.

Anelida and Arcite

- It is an incomplete poem in 357 lines.
- Divided into 2 parts-
 1. Preface- About faithfulness of Arcite to Queen Anelida in 210 lines of Rhyme Royal.
 2. 'Compleynt of Anelida'- 140 lines of varying lengths and meters.

A Treatise on Astrolabe

- Written in Middle English in prose.
- Describes a scientific instrument.
- Written on the request of Lewis, could be his own son or his friends'-

“Lyte Lowys my sone”

The Canterbury Tales

Some Important Details

- ▶ 30 pilgrims, including Chaucer the Pilgrim, gather around at the Tabard Inn, Southwark, on their way to the shrine of St. Thomas Beckett of Canterbury- **Pilgrimage**
- ▶ The Host- Harry Bailly.
- ▶ Story telling contest for free dinner at the Tabard Inn- for entertainment, not for religious purpose.
- ▶ Harry himself will judge.
- ▶ Tales to be told- $30 \times 2 \times 2 = 120$ tales
- ▶ Only 24 could be written in his lifetime.

- ▶ Estate satire- representatives of different “estates” or professions are described with certain irony.
- ▶ Exceptions- The Knight, The poor Parson and the Plowman (They are depicted as almost ideal figures.)
- ▶ Setting: Springtime
- ▶ Month: April
- ▶ No particular social hierarchy is maintained in the narration. The order is consciously contrived to suggest an air of naturalness in the descriptions.
- ▶ Tales in prose- Parson’s Tale and Tale of Melibee.
- ▶ Narrated by fictitious Chaucer- Tale of Melibee and Sir Thopas Tale.
- ▶ Character not described in the Prologue- Nun’s priest, Second Nun and Chaucer himself.
- ▶ Female characters displayed in the Prologue- Wife of Bath and Prioress.
- ▶ Last portrayal in the General Prologue- The Pardoner.
- ▶ Harry Bailey- Name is mentioned only in the Prologue to the Cook’s Tale.
- ▶ Prioress, Monk, Friar, Parson, Summoner, Pardoner and Clerk- Church
- ▶ Knight and Squire- only characters from the house of chivalry.
- ▶ The General Prologue is written in 857 lines.

Medieval Literary Forms

- ▶ The Knight’s Tale- Romance
- ▶ The Miller’s and Reeve’s Tale- Fabliau
- ▶ The Nun’s Priest’s Tale- Beast Fable

- ▶ The Pardoner's Tale- Exemplum
- ▶ The Wife of Bath's Tale- Arthurian Romance
- ▶ The Clerk's Tale- Folk tale
- ▶ The Franklin's Tale- Breton Lay
- ▶ The Prioress' and Second Nun's Tale- Miracle story; saint's legend
- ▶ The Parson's Tale- Sermon

CHARCTERS IN THE PROLOGUE

- **The Narrator** - The narrator makes it quite clear that he is also a character in his book. Although he is called Chaucer, we should be wary of accepting his words and opinions as Chaucer's own. In the General Prologue, the narrator presents himself as a gregarious and naïve character. Later on, the Host accuses him of being silent and sullen. Because the narrator writes down his impressions of the pilgrims from memory, whom he does and does not like, and what he chooses and chooses not to remember about the characters, tells us as much about the narrator's own prejudices as it does about the characters themselves.
- **The Knight** - The first pilgrim Chaucer describes in the General Prologue, and the teller of the first tale. The Knight represents the ideal of a medieval Christian medieval Hero. He has participated in no less than fifteen of the great crusades of his era. Brave, experienced, and prudent, the narrator greatly admires him.
- **The Wife of Bath** - Bath is an English town on the Avon River, not the name of this woman's husband. Though she is a seamstress by occupation, she seems to be a professional wife.

She has been married five times and had many other affairs in her youth, making her well-practiced in the art of love. She presents herself as someone who loves marriage and sex, but, from what we see of her, she also takes pleasure in rich attire, talking, and arguing. She is deaf in one ear and has a gap between her front teeth, which was considered attractive in Chaucer's time. She has travelled on pilgrimages to Jerusalem three times and elsewhere in Europe as well.



- **The Pardoner** - Pardoners granted papal indulgences—reprieves from penance in exchange for charitable donations to the Church. Many pardoners, including this one, collected profits for themselves. In fact, Chaucer's Pardoner excels in fraud, carrying a bag full of fake relics—for example, he claims to have the veil of the Virgin Mary. The Pardoner has long, greasy, yellow hair and is beardless. These characteristics were associated with shiftiness and gender ambiguity in Chaucer's time. The Pardoner also has a gift for singing and preaching whenever he finds himself inside a church.
- **The Miller** - Stout and brawny, the Miller has a wart on his nose and a big mouth, both literally and figuratively. He threatens the Host's notion of propriety when he drunkenly insists on telling the second tale. Indeed, the Miller seems to enjoy overturning all conventions: he ruins the Host's carefully planned storytelling order; he rips doors off hinges; and he tells a tale that is somewhat blasphemous, ridiculing religious clerks, scholarly clerks, carpenters, and women.
- **The Prioress** - Described as modest and quiet, this Prioress (a nun who is head of her convent) aspires to have exquisite taste. Her table manners are dainty, she knows French (though not the French of the court), she dresses well, and she is charitable and compassionate.
- **The Monk** - Most monks of the Middle Ages lived in monasteries according to the Rule of Saint Benedict, which demanded that they devote their lives to "work and prayer." This Monk cares little for the Rule; his devotion is to hunting and eating. He is large, loud, and well clad in hunting boots and furs.
- **The Friar** - Roaming priests with no ties to a monastery, friars were a great object of criticism in Chaucer's time. Always ready to befriend young women or rich men who might need his

services, the friar actively administers the sacraments in his town, especially those of marriage and confession. However, Chaucer's worldly Friar has taken to accepting bribes. The

- **Summoner** - The Summoner brings persons accused of violating Church law to ecclesiastical court. This Summoner is a lecherous man whose face is scarred by leprosy. He gets drunk frequently, is irritable, and is not particularly qualified for his position. He spouts the few words of Latin he knows in an attempt to sound educated.
- **The Host** - The leader of the group, the Host is large, loud, and merry, although he possesses a quick temper. He mediates among the pilgrims and facilitates the flow of the tales. His title of "host" may be a pun, suggesting both an innkeeper and the Eucharist, or Holy Host.
- **The Parson** - The only devout churchman in the company, the Parson lives in poverty, but is rich in holy thoughts and deeds. The pastor of a sizable town, he preaches the Gospel and makes sure to practice what he preaches. He is everything that the Monk, the Friar, and the Pardoner are not.
- **The Squire** - The Knight's son and apprentice. The Squire is curlyhaired, youthfully handsome, and loves dancing and courting.
- **The Clerk** - The Clerk is a poor student of philosophy. Having spent his money on books and learning rather than on fine clothes, he is threadbare and wan. He speaks little, but when he does, his words are wise and full of moral virtue.
- **The Man of Law** - A successful lawyer commissioned by the king. He upholds justice in matters large and small and knows every statute of England's law by heart.
- **The Manciple** - A manciple was in charge of getting provisions for a college or court. Despite his lack of education, this Manciple is smarter than the thirty lawyers he feeds.

- **The Merchant** - The Merchant trades in furs and other cloths, mostly from Flanders. He is part of a powerful and wealthy class in Chaucer's society.
- **Shipman** - Brown-skinned from years of sailing, the Shipman has seen every bay and river in England, and exotic ports in Spain and Carthage as well. He is a bit of a rascal, known for stealing wine while the ship's captain sleeps.
- **The Physician** - The Physician is one of the best in his profession, for he knows the cause of every malady and can cure most of them. Though the Physician keeps himself in perfect physical health, the narrator calls into question the Physician's spiritual health: he rarely consults the Bible and has an unhealthy love of financial gain.
- **The Franklin** - The word "franklin" means "free man." In Chaucer's society, a franklin was neither a vassal serving a lord nor a member of the nobility. This particular franklin is a connoisseur of food and wine, so much so that his table remains laid and ready for food all day.
- **The Reeve** - A reeve was similar to a steward of a manor, and this reeve performs his job shrewdly—his lord never loses so much as a ram to the other employees, and the vassals under his command are kept in line. However, he steals from his master.
- **The Plowman** - The Plowman is the Parson's brother and is equally good-hearted. A member of the peasant class, he pays his tithes to the Church and leads a good Christian life.
- **The Guildsmen** - Listed together, the five Guildsmen appear as a unit. English guilds were a combination of labor unions and social fraternities: craftsmen of similar occupations joined together to increase their bargaining power and live communally. All five Guildsmen are clad in the livery of their brotherhood.

- **The Cook** - The Cook works for the Guildsmen. Chaucer gives little detail about him, although he mentions a crusty sore on the Cook's leg.
- **The Yeoman** - The servant who accompanies the Knight and the Squire. The narrator mentions that his dress and weapons suggest he may be a forester.
- **The Second Nun** - The Second Nun is not described in the General Prologue, but she tells a saint's life for her tale.
- **The Nun's Priest** - Like the Second Nun, the Nun's Priest is not described in the General Prologue. His story of Chanticleer, however, is well crafted and suggests that he is a witty, self-effacing preacher.