

THE PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES

Geoffrey Chaucer
(1340-1400)

*“Where Langland cries aloud in anger threatening
the world with hellfire, Chaucer looks on and
smiles”.*

Aldous Huxley

LIFE AND WORKS OF GEOFFERY CHAUCER

“The Canterbury Tales” is the most famous and critically acclaimed work of Geoffrey Chaucer, a late-fourteenth-century English poet. Little is known about Chaucer’s personal life, and even less about his education, but a number of existing records document his professional life. Chaucer was born in London in the early 1340s, the only son in his family. Chaucer’s father, originally a property-owning wine merchant, became tremendously wealthy when he inherited the property of relatives who had died in the Black Death of 1349. He was, therefore, able to send the young Geoffrey off as a page to the Countess of Ulster, which meant that Geoffrey was not required to follow in his ancestors’ footsteps and become a merchant. Eventually, Chaucer began to serve the countess’s husband, Prince Lionel, son to King Edward III. For most of his life, Chaucer served in the Hundred Years War between England and France, both as a soldier and, since he was fluent in French and Italian and conversant in Latin and other tongues, as a diplomat. His diplomatic travels brought him twice to Italy, where he might have met Boccaccio, whose writing influenced Chaucer’s work, and Patriarch.

In or around 1378, Chaucer began to develop his vision of an English poetry that would be linguistically accessible to all— was obedient neither to the court, whose official language was French, nor to the Church, whose official language was Latin. Instead, Chaucer wrote in the vernacular, the English that was spoken in and around London in his day. Undoubtedly, he was influenced by the writings of the Florentines Dante, Patriarch, and Boccaccio, who wrote in the Italian vernacular. Even in England, the practice was becoming increasingly common among poets, although many were still writing in French and Latin.

That the nobles and kings Chaucer served (Richard II until 1399, then Henry IV) were impressed with Chaucer’s skills, as a negotiator is obvious from the many rewards he received for his service. Money, provisions, higher appointments, and property eventually allowed him to retire on a royal pension. In 1374, the king appointed Chaucer Controller of the Customs of Hides, Skins and Wools in the port of London, which meant that he was a government official who worked with cloth importers. His experience overseeing imported cloths might be why he frequently describes in exquisite details the garments and fabric that attire his characters. Chaucer held the position at the customhouse for twelve years, after which he left

London for Kent, the county in which Canterbury is located. He served as a justice of the peace for Kent, living in debt, and was then appointed Clerk of the Works at various holdings of the king, including Westminster and the Tower of London. After he retired in the early 1390s, he seems to have been working primarily on *The Canterbury Tales*, which he began around 1387. By the time of his retirement, Chaucer had already written a substantial amount of narrative poetry, including the celebrated romance *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Chaucer's personal life is less documented than his professional life. In the late 1360s, he married Philippa Roet, who served Edward III's queen. They had at least two sons together. Philippa was the sister to the mistress of John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster. For John of Gaunt, Chaucer wrote one of his first poems, *The Book of the Duchess*, which was a lament for the premature death of John's young wife, Blanche. Whether or not Chaucer had an extramarital affair is a matter of some contention among the historians. In a legal document that dates from 1380, a woman named Cecily Champaigne released Chaucer from the accusation of seizing her (*raptus*), though whether the expression denotes that he raped her, committed adultery with her, or abducted her son is unclear. Chaucer's wife Philippa apparently died in 1387.

Chaucer lived through a time of incredible tension in the English social sphere. The Black Death, which ravaged England during Chaucer's childhood and remained widespread afterward, wiped out an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the population. Consequently, the labour force gained increased leverage and was able to bargain for better wages, which led to resentment from the nobles and propertied classes. These classes received another blow in 1381, when the peasantry, helped by the artisan class, revolted against them. The merchants were also wielding increasing power over the legal establishment, as the Hundred Years War created profit for England and, consequently, appetite for luxury was growing. The merchants capitalized on the demand for luxury goods, and when Chaucer was growing up, London was pretty much run by a merchant oligarchy, which attempted to control both the aristocracy and the lesser artisan classes. Chaucer's political sentiments are unclear, for although *The Canterbury Tales* documents the various social tensions in the manner of the popular genre of estates satire, the narrator refrains from making overt political statements, and what he does say is in no way thought to represent Chaucer's own sentiments.

BACKGROUND TO “THE CANTERBURY TALES”

The Canterbury Tales is one of the landmarks of English literature, perhaps the greatest work produced in Middle English and certainly among the most ambitious. It is one of the few works of the English Middle Ages that has had a continuous history of publication. It was the last of Geoffrey Chaucer's works, written after Troilus and Criseyde during the final years of Chaucer's life. Chaucer did not complete the entire Canterbury Tales as he designed it. He structured the tales so that each pilgrim would tell four tales, leading to a total of over one hundred tales. However, Chaucer only completed twenty-four tales, not even completing one tale for each pilgrim.

The Canterbury Tales includes a number of tales that Chaucer had written before creating the grand work itself. The Second Nun's Tale and the Knight's Tale were included as part of Chaucer's biography in the prologue to The Legend of Good Women, a poem by Chaucer that predated The Canterbury Tales, but since those stories survive only as part of The Canterbury Tales and not as independent works, it is impossible to determine whether Chaucer transferred them entirely to The Canterbury Tales or adapted them from a previous form.

The versions of The Canterbury Tales that remain in the present day come from two different Middle English manuscripts known as the Ellesmere and the Hengwrt manuscripts. The Ellesmere is the more famous of the two, containing miniature pictures of each of the pilgrims at the head of each of their respective tales, but compared to the Hengwrt manuscript the Ellesmere is heavily edited for grammatical content. The Hengwrt is thus valued as the best and most accurate manuscript of The Canterbury Tales. There are discrepancies between the two versions concerning the order and inclusion of the tales. The Hengwrt manuscript lacks the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and tale, part of the Parson's Tale, and several of the tales' prologues.

The structure of The Canterbury Tales is indebted to Boccaccio's Decameron, a work by Chaucer's contemporary in which ten nobles from Florence, to escape the plague, stay in a country villa and amuse each other by each telling tales. Boccaccio had a significant influence on Chaucer. The Knight's Tale was an English version of a tale by Boccaccio, while six of Chaucer's tales have possible sources in the Decameron: the Miller's Tale, the Reeve's, the Clerk's, the Merchant's, the Franklin's, and the Shipman's. However, Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury form a wider range of society

compared to Boccaccio's elite storytellers, allowing for greater differences in tone and substance.

No single literary genre dominates *The Canterbury Tales*. The tales include romantic adventures, fabliaux, saint's biographies, animal fables, religious allegories and even a sermon, and range in tone from pious, moralistic tales to lewd and vulgar sexual farces. The form that Chaucer most often employs for his tale is the fabliau. These tales generally concern lower class characters; the standard form has an older husband whose younger wife has an affair with a man of flexible social status. This can be seen most accurately in the Miller's Tale, which strictly adheres to fabliau conventions. Throughout the tales, two major themes emerge: the first is the idea of the unfaithful wife that is employed not only in fabliau but other literary genres. The other is the idea of the patient and suffering woman, who is exalted for her steadfast behaviour. Chaucer exploits this division between the female saint and the whore throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, with few tales whose plots do not centre at least marginally on this distinction.

INTRODUCTION TO “THE PROLOGUE”

Chaucer’s original plan for *The Canterbury Tales* was for each character to tell four tales, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. But, instead of 120 tales, the text ends after twenty-four tales, and the party is still on its way to Canterbury. Chaucer either planned to revise the structure to cap the work at twenty-four tales, or else left it incomplete when he died on October 25, 1400. Other writers and printers soon recognized *The Canterbury Tales* as a masterful and highly original work, though Chaucer had been influenced by the great French and Italian writers of his age, works like Boccaccio's *Decameron* were not accessible to most English readers, so the format of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the intense realism of its characters, were virtually unknown to readers in the fourteenth century before Chaucer. William Caxton, England's first printer, published *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1470s, and it continued to enjoy a rich printing history that never truly faded. By the English Renaissance, poetry critic George Puttenham had identified Chaucer as the father of the English literary canon. Chaucer's project to create a literature and poetic language for all classes of society succeeded, and today Chaucer still stands as one of the great shapers of literary narrative and character.

At the Tabard Inn, a tavern in Southwark, near London, the narrator joins a company of twenty-nine pilgrims. The pilgrims, like the narrator, are travelling to the shrine of the martyr Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury. The narrator gives a descriptive account of twenty-seven of these pilgrims, including a Knight, Squire, Yeoman, Prioress, Monk, Friar, Merchant, Clerk, Man of Law, Franklin, Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer, Tapestry-Weaver, Cook, Shipman, Physician, Wife, Parson, Ploughman, Miller, Manciple, Reeve, Summoner, Pardoner, and Host. (He does not describe the Second Nun or the Nun’s Priest, although both characters appear later in the book.) The Host, whose name, we find out in the Prologue to the Cook's Tale, is Harry Bailey, suggests that the group ride together and entertain one another with stories. He decides that each pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. Whomever he judges to be the best storyteller will receive a meal at Bailey’s tavern, courtesy of the other pilgrims. The pilgrims draw lots and determine that the knight will tell the first tale. In “The Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*”, Chaucer is introducing all of the travellers who are supposed to tell their tales during this holy journey.

A CRITIQUE OF THE PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES

As April comes, the narrator begins a pilgrimage to Canterbury from the Tabard Inn at Southwark. Twenty-nine people make the pilgrimage toward Canterbury and the narrator describes them in turn. The pilgrims are listed in relative order of status, thus the first character is the Knight. Chaucer describes the knight as a worthy man who had fought in the Crusades. With him is a Squire, the son of the Knight and a 'lusty bachelor' of twenty. The Knight has a second servant, a Yeoman. There is also a Prioress, shy and polite. She is prim and proper, sympathetic and well mannered. The Prioress wears a brooch with the inscription "All things are subject unto love." With the Prioress is her secretary (the Second Nun) and a Monk. The monk is a robust and masculine man who loves to hunt. The Friar, Hubert, is an immoral man more concerned with making profit than converting men from sin. The Merchant from Flanders is a pompous man who speaks endlessly on how profits may be increased. He seems grave, yet there is no better man, according to the narrator. The Clerk follows the Merchant. As an Oxford student without employment, he is impoverished and wears threadbare clothes. The Man of Law is a man who deserves to be held in awe. He knows the law to the letter and gives the impression that he is far busier than he actually is. A Franklin travels with him. He is a man who lives in comfort and is interested simply in pleasure, particularly culinary delight. There are also five guildsmen: a Weaver, a Dyer, a Carpenter, a Tapestry-maker and a Haberdasher. With them they bring a Cook. A Shipman is the next traveller, who comes from the port of Dartmouth and with him a Physician. The Wife of Bath is next; she is a weaver who wears bright red clothing. She has been married five times (and had several companions as a youth). The Parson is an honourable, decent man who cares for his congregation and adheres to the teachings of Christ. With him is his brother, a Plowman, who is equally kind. The final travellers are a Miller, a Manciple, a Reeve, a Summoner and a Pardoner. The Miller is a large man with an imposing physique. The Manciple is from a lawyers' college and knows every legal manoeuvre. The Reeve is a slender man with a fiery temper. The Summoner is quite unfair in his job (he is responsible for serving summons to court for church crimes). If he likes a scoundrel, he can ignore the man's sins. The Pardoner is an effeminate man. Each of these travellers finds themselves in the Tabard Inn, where the Host, a bold and merry man, suggests that on their way to Canterbury each traveller tell two tales, and on the way back each traveller

tell two more. They draw lots to decide who will tell the first tale, and it is the Knight who has the honour.

In the General Prologue, Chaucer sets up the general structure of the tales and introduces each of the characters that will tell the tales. The characters that tell each of the tales are as important as the characters in the tales that they tell; a significant portion of the action of the Canterbury Tales takes place within the prologues to each of the tales. The General Prologue in essence serves as a guide for the tales, giving some explanation for the motivation behind each of the tales each character tells.

The introductory imagery of the General Prologue mixes the spiritual with the secular and moves between each form with relative ease. The Canterbury Tales begins with the famous lines “Whanne that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,” setting up imagery of spring and regeneration. Yet he does not continue with the logical outcome of this springtime imagery. Instead of conforming to the cliché “in springtime a young man’s fancy turns to love,” Chaucer veers into more spiritual territory. In springtime these travellers make a religious pilgrimage to Canterbury. Yet Chaucer is equally uninterested in the religious details of this journey, and keeps the beginning passages of the General Prologue focused on nature and not on the human society with which the travellers will deal.

Chaucer gives relatively straightforward descriptions of the characters and has some inclination to show their best qualities. Chaucer describes virtually each pilgrimage as an exemplar a number of these pilgrims are described as ‘perfect’ in some way or another, most often in their craft. Furthermore, these pilgrims exist almost entirely in terms of their profession. Chaucer gives only a few of them character names, and these emerge only in terms of conversation between the characters during each tale’s prologue, and not in Chaucer’s description in the General Prologue.

Yet even within these descriptions he allows for subtle criticism and sly wit. The description of the Prioress in particular, is overtly flattering yet masquerades a sharp criticism of her foolish sentimentality and oppressive attention to manners. Although she strives to be polite and refined, she spoke French “after the school of Stratford-at-Bow,” the vulgar rural pronunciation compared to elite Parisian French. Furthermore, she weeps at the mere sight of a dead mouse, a gross overreaction to a small tragedy.

The descriptions of the upper members of the clergy deserve special note in context of the tales. Each of the clergymen defies traditional

expectations; the Monk is a rough labourer, while the Friar is resolutely immoral. Chaucer lists the various sins of the Friar: he sells pardon from sin for a price, seduces women who ask for pardons, and spends more time in bars than he does aiding the poor. His concern for profit is a stark contrast with that of the Merchant. While the Merchant merely dispenses advice on how to attain profit, it is the Friar who applies his entire existence to its pursuit. The Friar further contrasts with the later description of the Parson, a man who performs his duties honourably and cares for his congregation. In his description of the Parson, Chaucer lists the various admirable qualities, none of which are held by the Friar.

The description of the Merchant is also notable, for it shows the disparity between how the narrator overtly appraises a character and what he describes. After listing a number of unflattering qualities in the Merchant, the narrator still judges him to be a fine man; in these descriptions, the details and anecdotes are far more important in defining character than the final stated opinion of the narrator.

Chaucer indulges in comic criticism in his portrait of the Clerk. This Oxford student, however educated, is not worldly enough for any normal employment. He has studied only impractical knowledge, and even carries among his few possessions several volumes of Aristotle.

Most of the travellers engaged in a profession receive little description; as the travellers move down the social scale Chaucer gives them less and less detailed descriptions. The Wife of Bath is the most significant of the travellers low on the social scale. Chaucer describes her as lewd and boisterous. Her clothing, all variations of bright red, is ostentatious, meant to attract attention from others. Chaucer even indicates that she is quite promiscuous she has been married five times and had an undetermined number of lovers. The other traveller who merits a lengthy description is the Pardoner. He has a very effeminate manner, with a high voice and soft features. Chaucer even compares him to a gelding (a castrated horse) or a mare, which may be a subtle comment on his sexuality.

The prologue sets up the general design of the Canterbury Tales. Each character will tell four tales during the journey, leading to a grand total of 116 tales. Chaucer never completed all of the tales, starting only about one fourth of the possible stories, not all of which remain in their entirety. Some of the stories that remain are only fragments that have either been lost or were never completed by the author.

When the travellers draw lots to decide who will tell the first story, it is the Knight who has the first choice. Although the order is supposedly random, the Knight draws the first lot and thus randomly receives the rank appropriate to his status, which indicates that the Host may have fixed the lots in order to curry favour with the Knight.

MOST EXPECTED QUESTIONS

Q: DISCUSS “THE PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES” AS A MIRROR TO FOURTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH SOCIETY.

Q: EXPLAIN CHAUCER’S REALISM.

Q: “THE PROLOGUE TO THE CANTERBURY TALES” IS A REALISTIC DEPICTION OF FOURTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH LIFE, ELABORATE.

Ans:

Chaucer is a true representative poet of fourteenth century English society. The Medieval atmosphere and colour is aptly and vividly described in his poetry in general and in his “The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales” in particular, which may be read as a national portrait gallery depicting the contemporary society of England. Well does Compton Ricket say:

“Chaucer symbolizes, as no other writer does, The Middle Ages. He stands in much the same relation to the life of his time as Pope does to the earlier phase of eighteenth century, and Tennyson to the Victorian era; and his place in English Literature is even more important than theirs.”

The first thing that establishes Chaucer as a typical representative poet of the age is the presentation of the hierarchical structure of medieval society. It extends from the great nobles and landlords to the poor peasants and between these extremes there are lesser landlords and executive officers. Three groups of Chaucer’s thirty pilgrims can be isolated to show the hierarchical structure of his society. Chaucer’s Knight stands at the class of lesser landlords. The Reeve and the Miller represent the class known as the administrative officers. Their job was to manage an estate and to mill all grain on an estate respectively.

Chaucer, however, talks not only about the hierarchical structure in general but also like a true sociologist sufficiently and critically examines the social behaviour of the individual members of the social classes. His critical portraits of the Reeve, the Miller, the Franklin, the Friar name a few are good cases in point. Chaucer gives necessary information about their social standings and ranks and at the same time provides realistically a critical estimate of their personalities, their habits, behaviour patterns, thinking processes etc.

Chaucer confirms his status as faithful spokesman of his time by depicting the important persons of the rising middle class who were getting a place of prominence in the social set up: the Sergeant at Law and the Doctor of Physic are from the professional class. These persons do not own land but they are men of substance. The Merchant and the Wife of Bath belong to the class of traders. Their good clothes and equipment show that the persons belonging to the middle class were not only respectable in their appearance but also economically well off.

The father of English poetry has also painted a true picture of the medieval church. The church in Chaucer's lifetime was a centre of medieval society but it was the most corrupt institution. Now Chaucer truly represents his age in the sense that he has voiced the vices and abuses of the church through the characters of The Monk, The Friar, The Prioress, The Summoner and The Pardoner. The Monk is extremely fond of hunting and is opposed to serious study. The Friar is a jolly beggar and a man of this world while the prioress is concerned only with manners than austerity. These characters embody various drawbacks, which had crept to the members of medieval church. However, the picture was not totally dark as there were still honest and true Christians like the parson and the ploughman. Chaucer does not condemn the religious order. He knows that evils arise out of human weaknesses.

Chaucer is a true exponent of his age in his practice of different kinds of poems. He makes use of almost all the prevalent literary genres in "The Canterbury Tales". His "The Miller's Tales" is a fabliau; "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is a burlesque. "The Nun's Priests Tale" is a fable while "The Knight's Tale" is a Romance. "The Canterbury Tales" is undoubtedly an anthology of Medieval Literature.

Fourteenth century was an age of transition, the medieval age was dying and the Renaissance was taking its birth. Chaucer is called the evening star of the Medieval Age and the morning star of the Renaissance because he represents both the old and the new orders in his poetry. In his "Prologue", he propagates anthropocentric movement of humanism with views on man, world, and worldly life.

In the light of above discussion, we can confidently conclude that Chaucer has truly captured the spirit of his time. His "Prologue" is a remarkable piece of social criticism. Nevertheless, his image as a true representative poet is not complete unless we compare him with his contemporary poets. His contemporaries like John Wycliffe and Gower

captured in their writings only certain facets of time like religious corruption and social disturbance. But Chaucer has painted accurately and comprehensively the multi-shaded life of Medieval English society. His thirty pilgrims cover the entire range of contemporary society.

It remains to be noted that Chaucer has painted only the gay side of his lifetime. He turns a blind eye to its dark side. It was perhaps owing to the fact that he was the courtly poet, and not a poet of people as Langland was. He wrote to amuse the court and the nobility and being himself an easy going man and lover of pleasant things of life, hardly cared for the dismal aspects of life around him. Though he seems to be ignoring the social and religious crises, yet a keen observer of Chaucer's "Prologue" would not fail to notice the reverberation of the crises in the portraits of Doctor of Physic, The Shipman and the Ploughman.

Finally, we can remark that the "Prologue" is a national portrait gallery. We come across persons belonging to various classes of medieval society. Though Chaucer talks about a small number of pilgrims, yet the impression and picture, which the reader gathers is of a large community rich in the variety and complexity of its life. But Chaucer's poetry is much more than a mere medieval document. It has a permanent value. The characters belong not to their own age but to all ages. Thus, Medieval Chaucer is also a universal Chaucer.

Q: GIVE A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CHAUCER'S ECCLESIASTES.

Q: DESCRIBE THE PROLOGUE AS AN INDICTMENT OF CLERGY OF CHAUCER'S TIME.

Ans:

Chaucer's society was strongly medieval and amazingly modern. The new learning was making its impact and scholasticism developed cracks but still religion, however, exercised powerful hold over the popular mind, but the clergy was becoming worldly minded. They had lost dedication and had become corrupt and degenerated. However, exceptions were there but they were rare.

"The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales" gives a vivid picture of the church. The Ecclesiastes of the time had unfortunately lost their early purity and piety and had degenerated into corrupt sensitive seekers of the world. Religion was a powerful force in shaping the lives of the people. Reformation was approaching and people were dissatisfied with the condition of the church.

Chaucer realistically pointed out the corruption, which had crept into the ecclesiastical order of the times. The clergymen had forgotten their sacred duties and had become willing victim of profligacy of Epicureanism. The papal court itself had become a centre of vice and luxury and naturally the corruption of the head spread through the whole body. The rank and file of clergy led a dissipated life of moral laxity, indiscipline and ignorance.

Some of Chaucer's contemporaries expressed their moral indignation over this shocking state of corruption in the religious world of their day. Gower and Langland bewailed impotently and Wycliffe was driven into an open revolt. Chaucer does not grow bitter like his contemporaries. He simply makes fun of them. The teaching of Wycliffe and his followers might have influenced Chaucer, but he never became an avowed follower of Wycliffe, as some of his contemporaries did. He frankly recognizes the abuses of the church and denounces them in an implicit manner. His picture is free from the colouring of any prejudice. If he has painted the picture of vice and depravity, he has also drawn the portrait of the poor Parson, who possesses true Christian virtues.

His attitude to the church as shown from the "The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales" is one of tolerance and good humour. Chaucer was neither over religious nor irreligious. Chaucer's healthy and humane attitude observes without distortion and records with sympathy and humour.

The portraits of the churchmen have occasional touches of satire. Two of these portraits are predominantly satirical. The Pardoner and the Summoner are of the worst type and they justifiably provoke him to anger. But most of the other portraits are steeped in gentle humour. The dominant tone in most of these ecclesiastical portraits is humorous not satirical.

The Monk, The Friar, The Summoner, The Pardoner and The Prioress are examples of the corrupt clergy. They are no longer heedful of their own spiritual welfare or that of their flocks, but are prone to worldly pleasures. The Monk is fond of hunting and is opposed to serious study and penance. He is not what he should be. Chaucer finds this discrepancy in the character of the Monk and presents it with great skill and vividness. The Friar extorts money from people with his clever speech. He ingratiates himself with women and seduces them. Whether as an individual or as a type, he is so real that we know and despise and in this sense beware us across the years as a distinct and living person.

The Pardoner makes money by selling pardons to sinners. Chaucer's description of the physical attributes of the Pardoner makes him a highly

individualized character. The references to the hare and the goat, besides defining his eyes and voice connect him with these odd beasts. The Prioress belongs to upper strata of society and is driven into this profession like others by financial stringency and inability to raise a rich dowry. She has excellent decorum, wears fine clothes, keeps hounds which were against religious injunction and although she is moved by the suffering of a mouse. She has no feelings for fellow human beings.

The Summoner and the Pardoner are presented with extreme disgust. The Summoner keeps concubines and sells sanctions for keeping mistresses, drinks wine and suffers from leprosy as a result of excesses. To relieve the sombreness of the picture, we are given the idealized picture of the good Parson who is perhaps modelled on Wycliffe and is a living example of what a parson should be, and dyed-in-the-wool to the services of humanity, the poor and selfless. He himself does what he preaches to his parishioners. That is why; his portrait is free from satire. His portrait is printed without any corrupt streak or colour.

Chaucer seems to be quite at ease in the company of the men and women belonging to the church. He has not bitterly denounced their activities and therefore his picture gallery is fresh and vivid and is indelibly imprinted on the mind of the reader even after a casual reading.

Q: DISCUSS THE USE OF IRONY IN CHAUCER'S PROLOGUE.

Q: DISCUSS CHAUCER AS A SATIRIST.

Q: CHAUCER IS A TRUE REFORMER, ELABORATE.

Q: DESCRIBE CHAUCER'S LOVE, TOLERANCE AND SYMPATHY FOR HUMAN BEINGS.

Q: CHAUCER'S HUMOUR IS CONSTRUCTIVE AND HEALTHY RAHTER THAN DESTRUCTIVE, ELABORATE.

Ans:

One of the distinguishing features of Chaucer as a poet is his combination of objectivity with human sympathy and tolerance. On the one hand, he avoids ethical bias in his writings while on the other hand; he observes the world in tolerant and amused manners. These observations get their literary and material expression in his treatment of the pilgrims in the "General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales". Chaucer's tone as a poet is wonderfully instinct with geniality, tolerance, humour, and freshness so egregiously lacking in that of his contemporaries and predecessors who are too dreamy or too serious to be interesting.

In spite of his awareness of the sleaze and unrest in the society of his age, Chaucer is never upset or upsetting. His attitude is all acceptive, never rejective. He experiences what the French call *joie de vivre*, (the joy of living) and communicates it to his readers. No one can read Chaucer without feeling that it is good to be alive in this world, however, imperfect may it be in numerous respects. He is a chronic optimist. He is never harsh, rancorous bitter, or in a huff, and never falls out with his fellowmen for their failings. He leaves didacticism to Langland and “moral Gower” and he peacefully coexists with all human imperfections. It does not mean that he is not sarcastic or satirical, but his satire and sarcasm are always seasoned with lively humour. In fact, his forte is irony rather than satire. Aldous Huxley observes:

“Where Langland cries aloud in anger threatening the world with hell fire, Chaucer looks on and smiles”.

The great English humorists like Shakespeare and Fielding share with Chaucer the same broad human sympathy, which he first introduced into literature and which partly has bestowed upon his *Canterbury Tales* that character of perennial, vernal freshness which appears so abundantly on its every page.

Chaucer divides his twenty-nine pilgrims into three major groups-good, mixture of good and evil (though evil dominates) and evil. But whatever be the case his broad humanity and cordiality are all embracing. Chaucer treats the group of good human beings with extreme sympathy and love. He owes deep amount of respect to The Knight, The Parson and The Ploughman. He employs none of his ironic or satiric techniques in the case of these Christ like figures. This shows his wholehearted tribute to these persons. He glorifies The Knight’s various adventures, campaigns, modesty, courteousness and serious nature, The Parson’s honesty, devotion and humility, and The Ploughman’s patience and contentment. Chaucer’s vision is obviously one of compassion and charitableness.

It is, however, in the case of these pilgrims who are a curious mixture of good and evil that Chaucer combines impersonality, criticism and tolerance. In this category fall The Prioress, The Monk, The Friar, The Franklin, The Wife of Bath, The Reeve, The Miller, and The Doctor of Physic and so on. He shoots both humorous and ironic remarks in painting the real picture of these characters. For example, in order to voice The Monk’s rank worldliness, he appreciates his jingling bridle, through a humorous and witty remark. He employs implied irony in the character sketch of The Wife of

Bath. He calls her “worthy” and then ironically exposes her worthiness by declaring that she had five husbands at the church door.

Chaucer creates ambiguity to import ironical effect in the case of Madam Eglantine. He paints the picture of purely worldly Prioress but at the end creates a pre-planned ambiguity by remarking that her broach carries the motto that *amor vincit omnia* (love conquers all). The reader cannot help asking the interesting question that whether it is spiritual love or the purely worldly love which the motto professes. The reader feels little hesitation in concluding that it is the latter kind that the Prioress upholds.

Chaucer also makes fun of the characters through the technique of caricature. In order to make The Miller’s foul talk public he compares his mouth with the furnace. At times, an ironic discrepancy is employed to show the wide difference between the appearance and reality. Chaucer employs this technique in the character sketch of The Merchant, who tries to hide the harsh fact that he is in debt.

Nevertheless, the important thing to note is that, though these characters are full of drawbacks and are, therefore, ridiculed in an ironic way, yet the reader does not find any preconception in Chaucer’s attitude towards them instead, only genial kindness and generosity, which are all pervasive. It is obviously the observance of objectivity that frees Chaucer’s irony and humour from all prejudices.

His tolerance towards his fellow pilgrims strongly confirms that Chaucer knows and accepts that man is a mixture of both good and evil. He cracks witty comments, laughs at the people and pinpoints their foibles without showing any personal grudge, emotional disliking and disdainful attitude towards any of his characters. In brief, he writes in a tongue in cheek manners but his kind and humanistic nature permeates throughout the “Prologue”.

Though most of Chaucer’s Pilgrims are a strange mixture of good and evil yet, there are some characters like The Summoner and The Pardoner who are thoroughly evil; they are truly devil’s disciples. It is only in the handling of these rascals Chaucer becomes a satirist. He satirically remarks that only for a quart of wine, The Summoner allows a sinner to keep on committing sins for a whole year. He keeps concubines and encourages the people to follow his suit. His pimpled face, narrow eyes, scabby black brows, red face and above all his lecherous nature are described in a satirical strain. Similarly, Chaucer exposes satirically the greed and avaricious nature of the Pardoner by remarking that he robs the people by selling pig’s bones.

He has accumulated a lot of money by selling false pardons. Chaucer castigates him by comparing him with such odd animals like rabbit and goat. The feminine touch in the Pardoner also carries many undertones. But despite this condemnation, Chaucer amusingly calls them “gentle rascal” and “noble ecclesiast” respectively. This shows that Chaucer accepts that both The Summoner and The Pardoner are human beings and not monster or devils. Therefore, the satire becomes hardly biting and suffocating as we find in the case of Swift or Voltaire.

Morally, he disapproves many of his pilgrims but the poet as Keats says “live in gusto, be it foul or fair”. His humour is always accompanied by his humanism; therefore, there is nothing morbid about it. It is rather the expression of his joyous sense of existence. He appears before us as a happy spectator who observes total impersonality in depicting the general condition of the fellow pilgrims. The great poet has, neither any grudge, nor gives any final opinion that could possibly hurt other’s feelings. Finally, he is a friendly, amiable and genial poet who has a large hearted tolerance of the foibles, follies and fopperies of human beings. He is full of “the milk of human kindness” and shares the universal charity and objectivity of Shakespeare.

Q: DISCUSS CHAUCER AS FATHER OF ENGLISH POETRY.

Q: GIVE A DETAILED DEPICTION OF CHAUCER’S CONTRIBUTION IN ENGLISH POETRY AND LANGUAGE.

Q: DISCUSS CHAUCER AS A MODERN POET.

Ans:

Chaucer has accurately captured the spirit and temper of his time in his poetry. Especially his “The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales” is a remarkable piece of social criticism. But his poetry is more than a mere medieval document. It has permanent value and universal relevance. The universal relevance is based upon several characteristic features, which the reader finds in the “The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales”.

In the first place, it is the element of realism, which imparts modernity. This quality of Chaucer’s poetry distinguishes him from his contemporaries. He portrays his characters as men and women of flesh and blood and not as monsters or angels. They are totally life size, whose prototypes can be found in each and every society. He is a great observer of man and has an extraordinary insight into human nature. His picture of human nature transcends all time and space. Chaucer’s Prioress is a living human being of this very world whose weak spots and drawbacks are traceable in the women

of all ages. The same Chaucerian type realism can be found in the works of the succeeding generation of English writers. But Chaucer is the fair practitioner of this thematic as well as stylistic device.

The theme of “The Canterbury Tales” is human relationship. Like a modern novelist, Chaucer presents the interrelationship of his pilgrims. In the course of interludes and the Tales, his characters talk, smile, laugh, weep, shout, swear, pay compliments and make jokes. The gentle Knight soothes the angry ones with courteous words, while the sturdy Miller and the slender Reeve rail at each other. In short, Chaucer observes the mutual relations of the characters. This is a typical modern interest, especially in modern fiction. On account of this, Chaucer has been called the father of English fiction.

Chaucer’s Pilgrims exhibit a secular outlook. Most of the characters are interested in worldly activities. Who can deny the purely materialistic approach of The Wife of Bath, The Monk, The Friar, The Merchant, and The Summoner etc? Such a secular, liberal and materialistic approach towards life is obviously a modern phenomenon as many modern English writers like Russell and Huxley have strongly endorsed in their writings.

The purely, worldly and secular approach of the Pilgrims is snubbed by Chaucer either through humour or irony or satire. These techniques are so solid, novel and original that on the one hand, they make him prominent among his contemporaries while on the other hand, make him a modern writer.

His humour is spontaneous and unique. It also takes part in giving the standard of a modern poet to Chaucer in his works. It is not the result of deliberate cultured efforts. It is the instrument of his vision of life. Chaucer observes everything and records each detail with smiling eyes, slightly emphasizing one aspect here or another there in order to evoke in the reader that psychological state which makes him laugh without any malice. Tolerance is admittedly, the keynote of his humour. Chaucer employs humour by emphasizing upon the jingling bridle of The Monk, irony by calling Prioress as Madam Eglantine and satire by calling the Summoner as noble rascal. The very tone and vitality of Chaucer’s humour with its tags of sympathy and tolerance is a universal trait on the part of the English poets and the novelists like Fielding, Pope, Dickens, Jane Austen, Swift and Yeats.

One of the distinguishing features of Chaucer’s poetry is precision and comprehensiveness. These two characteristics are most markedly manifested in the depiction of twenty-nine Pilgrims of “General Prologue”. Although he

outlines his characters very briefly, yet the reader imports a complete picture of the fellow Pilgrims. For example, the character of Squire consists of just twenty lines but his appearance, dress, activities, and inner desires are expressed in such a superb way that the whole picture of a living human being comes before the eyes. Certainly, he packs maximum meanings in minimum space. All these three elements of economy, precision and comprehensiveness are typical modern qualities, which one can find in the writings of T.S. Eliot, Huxley and Russell.

Besides, Chaucer employs in “The Canterbury Tales” the technique of dramatic monologue and which is one of the most widely used literary devices in modern fiction and poetry. Each of his Pilgrims comes on the stage to tell tales very much like the speaker of a dramatic monologue. It is interesting to note that the same technique was later on developed and successfully practised by Browning and T.S. Eliot.

Another achievement of Chaucer, which endows upon him the title of father of English literature, is the standardization of English language. He chose East Midland Dialect for the writings, enriched it through his free borrowing and adaptation of words from French, Greek and Latin. With the result East Midland became the most popular and the richest of all the dialects and in the course of time, thus, in a sense Chaucer created the English language, as we know it today.

Well does Lowell say;

“Chaucer found his English a dialect and left it a language”.

Borrowing Saintsbury’s words about the transformation, which Dryden affected in English poetry, we may justly say that;

“Chaucer found the English language brick and left it marble”.

Last but not the least, remarkable achievement of Chaucer was the enrichment of English art of versification. He discarded the Anglo-Saxon formula of alliterative verses, which was imported from French a variety of metres to strengthen the English art of versification. The leading ones were octosyllabic and decasyllabic lines and heroic couplets. The important thing to note in that it was heroic couplet which together with its later developments the blank verse became the most popular metre of later English poetry and by adopting it Shakespeare and Milton produced the fine tragedies and epics in English literature.

In short, Chaucer is a poet of all times. His “The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales” has a local habitation but at the same time it is universal

in character. As such, Chaucer is rightly called the father of English literature.

Q: DISCUSS CHAUCER'S ART OF CHARACTERIZATION.

Q: CHAUCER'S CHARACTERS ARE MEDIEVAL IN APPEARANCE BUT UNIVERSAL IN DEEP, CONVERSE.

Ans:

Chaucer outlines his twenty-nine Pilgrims in "The General Prologue". The character sketches are brief, yet lucid and comprehensive. Both the ins and the outs of the characters are depicted in such a superb way that the entire personality seems moving before the reader's mind's eyes. It is, in fact, Chaucer's unique, rich and original art of characterization that has enabled him to delineate memorable portraits. For the purpose, he employs several techniques of characterization, some of which were popular among his contemporaries, while the others are purely his own creations.

One of the major techniques, which were current in the medieval authors, was Medieval Medical Theory of humours fire, water, air and earth. Chaucer's Franklin's temperament is "Sanguine" which means his character was dominated by the humour of blood, which on its turn was understood to produce several qualities, a large appetite and pleasure in physical satisfaction. Thus, the entire portrait of the Franklin is just an elaboration of one single phrase, ----"Sanguine".

Likewise, the medieval poets usually described their characters through the physiognomy to expose their inner spiritual health. Chaucer has successfully employed the technique in the case of The Summoner. His "fire red cherubim face", "pimpled face", "narrow eyes" and "scabby black brows" reflect his inner spiritual corruption. Depiction through physical features is also employed in the case of "The Wife of Bath and The Prioress".

Closely connected to this is Chaucer's technique of character portrait through dresses. It also helps the audience in understanding, recognizing and differentiating the pilgrims. The Prioress and The Wife of Bath's fashionable dresses reveal their materialism and amorous nature. Admittedly, Chaucer varies in presentation from the fully length portrait to the thumbnail sketch.

Nevertheless, one of Chaucer's most novel techniques is his presentation of characters as individuals and types. The characters are representatives of their respective classes and professions but at the same time they possess individual traits. Chaucer's Friar is a typical representative of the class of fourteenth century's friars; he is corrupt, hypocritical, greedy

and insensitive. But his good voice, his white neck and above all his name Brother Hubert all have individualistic touches and which seem to point to a particular friar of the poet's acquaintance. In short, Chaucer's characters are types as well as individuals. They are real and universal because no one is like them and they are real and universal because there is so much like us.

Another portrait delineation technique that Chaucer uses is to define the characters to a great or lesser extent by the job they do. Through this device, Chaucer communicates the reader the virtuosity or viciousness of his fellow Pilgrims. One can easily notice how The Summoner and The Pardoner derive their seedy characters from their disreputable jobs. The Pilgrims in the "Prologue" are also characterized through attitude to money. The nobility or the righteousness of Chaucer's Knight is established through the fact that though he is a senior pilgrim socially and a man of considerable means, yet the money and the social prestige is not his chief concern. But on the whole, his characters are so lifelike that some critics have suggested that Chaucer might have painted from real life. Professor J. M. Manly opines that Chaucer had in mind some "definite persons" while portraying the pilgrims.

Humour, irony, satire and tolerance are undoubtedly Chaucer's most prominent techniques of characterization. Chaucer treats the noble fellow with sympathy and love but his treatment of knaves, rogues and rascals is either humorous or ironical or satirical. These methods become a suitable mean of describing a character and commenting on him at the same time. For example, Chaucer calls The Wife of Bath a "worthy woman" and then in the very next line ironically qualifies the word "worthy" by commenting,

"Husbands at church door she had five".

But it remains to be noted that though he depicts most of his characters ironically and humorously yet tolerance and sympathy never lose Chaucer's attention. It does not, however, mean that he never hates any one. The characters that he detests and censures are the two corrupt church officers, The Summoner and The Pardoner. It is in the case of these two characters that Chaucer employs satire as a technique of characterization. The goodness of the "Gentle rascal" becomes clear when Chaucer satirically comments that just for a quart of wine he would allow a sinner to keep on committing sins.

The above analysis of Chaucer's techniques of characterization reveals that Chaucer depicts his characters as men and women of flesh and blood. He portrays them with the clay taken from the common earth. Some of them,

like The Knight, The Squire, and The Prioress are so modern, that they seem to be living in our own day.

However, the secret of this realistic delineation is the use of personal observation. He was a man of varied experience and he depicted what he saw personally. So far as his attitude in “The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales” is concerned, it is that of a detached observer. He had no personal bias for or against anyone. He observes impersonality in the depiction of his characters. In brief, we can say that it is Chaucer’s art and genius, which have bestowed immortality upon the twenty-nine pilgrims.

Lastly, two conclusions may be drawn from the above discussion of Chaucer’s art of characterization. His world of men is varied and wide. In the words of Dryden, here is “God’s plenty” and secondly, it is through the depiction of his characters, Chaucer has managed to give expression to his vision of life, which is both joyous and realistic. His characters, in the words of Palgrave, are:

“Seen in his mind so vividly that we know them more clearly than the men we see.”