

English (Hons)DI / Paper-I / History of English Literature.Topic "Chaucer and his Poetry (Continued...)"

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Lecture No - II

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Chaucer's special attributes :-

Any poet or author, to be successful in his or her particular field must possess some special power or quality; and it is more than true about the special gifts that providence had endowed Chaucer with. He was a person with a liking as well as keen eyes for observation. Legois and Cazamian write: "He turned impartial, eager and clear sighted eyes not only on the past, which his books discovered to him, but also on all the society of his time, on foreign countries, and on every class in his own country. His works reflect his century not in fragments, but completely. More than this he is often able to discern permanent features beneath the garments of the day, to penetrate to the everlasting springs of ~~the~~ human action. His truthful pictures of his Age and country contain a truth which is of all time and all countries."

Second quality that Chaucer seem to possess was his being at ease in almost every kind of surrounding. He was also a multi-professional man having diversified interest. Legois writes: "What is most striking in Chaucer is the interest he took in everyone of the different worlds through which he passed

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and all his heterogeneous occupations. He was at his ease at court, among traders, among clerks, with the people; observe was as much his joy as to read. Chaucer's literary career may conveniently ^{be} divided into three phases:-

(i) The French Period.

(ii) The Italian Period.

and

(iii) The English Period.

Chaucer's genius took its first nourishment from the French Poetry and romance which ^{was} in vogue at that time in the court and the cultivated public alike. It was but natural for the young Chaucer to go with day's fashion and his early works are more or less modelled on the French books. In this his quest he tried his hand at translating portions of the then popular "Roman de la Rose" and imitating many other works including an allegory on the death of Blanche, John of Gaunt's wife which he titled "The Boke of Duchesse". This work of the author confirms in toto to the reigning French School as does "the compleyent to Pite".

Chaucer visited Italy in 1372 and from then on his works started to show numerous traces of the influence of Italian poetry. In fact he visited Italy twice, the Italy of the early renaissance, the country of Petrarch, of Boccaccio, of Giotto whose works wrought a tremendous grasp on the Chaucer's creative mind. Arthur Compton Rickert writes about this fascination: "...just as French

Chivalry had inspired his earlier work, so did the glory of Italian literature colour his writings of this period. He read Petrarch, possibly met and talked with him also, and studied the stories of Boccaccio. On returning to England, he wrote "Troilus and Cressida", founded on "Filostrato" of Boccaccio. It was Boccaccio chastened by English reticence and religious feeling. He wrote also "The Story of Griselda (The Clerk's Tale)". The story of the patient Griselda had fascinated Petrarch, and became immeasurably popular. In this period we clearly see that under the influence of the Italian masters, Italian influences overshadow the author's French leanings. Among the creative writings of this period that Chaucer produced, we may also reckon "The House of Fame" which clearly owes much to Dante and "Legende of Good Women", the work that remained unfinished.

Now, passing through the realms of French and Italian influences, Chaucer was to find his true moorings in the native soil. In this third and final period of his creative life, he ceases to be Italian, as he had ceased to be French, and becomes English. This does not mean that he no longer draws freely upon French and Italian material," writes Hudson, "He continues to do this to the end. It simply means that, instead of being imitative, he becomes independent, relying upon himself entirely even for the use to which he puts his borrowed themes."

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The most famous and important work of Chaucer is "The Canterbury Tales" belongs to this last period which the critics designate as the English Period; though, of course, there are some other sundry minor poems of this period ^{also} to his credit. Some of the "Canterbury Tales" was written by him earlier but the most famous ones, which are more characteristically English, are penned during this period only. Among these ~~the~~ comes the stories of the Miller, the Reeve, the Cook, the wife of Bath, the Merchant, the Friar, the Nun Priest and the Pardoner.

Chaucer emerges as the first great story-teller in verse in "The Canterbury Tales". All the best tales are told easily, gracefully and sincerely. The tales are remarkable for their dramatic quality. In the 'Tales' English, for the first time appears as a natural means for expression of poetry and literature. Chaucer also stands out as a great humorist in these Tales. His humor is rich, tolerant, profound and sane, devoid of spite and cynicism. He also has a keen sense of pathos in human life. He has been successful in depicting the fresh out-door atmosphere which is the special charming feature of his poetry. To use the words of Hudson: "His descriptions of the country are often indeed in the conventional manner of his time, and his garden landscape and May flowers are to some extent things of tradition only. But he has a real love of nature and particularly of the spring,

and when he writes these, as in the "Prologue" and the "Knights Tale", the personal accent is unmistakable."

Chaucer, in a nutshell, symbolizes the "Middle Ages" in a manner no other writer does. we may sum up in the words of Compton Rickert, who says: "He stands in much the same relation to the life of his time as Pope does to the earlier phases of the eighteenth century, and Tennyson to the Victorian Era; and his place in English literature is even more important than theirs, for he is the first to use "naked words" in English; the first great English writer — the first to make our composite language a thing compact and vital."

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(concluded.)