

Chaucer as a Modern Poet

Chaucer is regarded as the father of English poetry and the earliest of the great moderns. In those dark days when the light of modernism had not yet visible on the horizon, Chaucer anticipated the modern taste and the modern mind, and in his poetry introduced qualities far in advance of his times. Though Chaucer could not write a drama or a novel as we know it, but his works contain the seeds both of the modern drama and the novel. If he had lived a few years more, he would certainly have been the first dramatist and novelist just as he is the first national poet of England.

Chaucer made several contributions to English poetry and his debt is so great that it can never be repaid even by the most exalted panegyrics that may be written for him. Chaucer enlarged the scope and range of the poetry, introduced minute observation of life around him, gave vivid and clear descriptions of the conditions of his times. He was the first great national poet of England giving full expression to the new hopes and aspirations of people of his times. He voiced through his poetry that national unity which had been brought about by the fusion of the Normans and the Anglo-Saxons. The growing influence of France was checked and for the first time the poet in the natural language of England gave expression to the life, ideals, hopes and aspirations of the people of the 14th century belonging to his country.

→ His Observation and Realism →

Modern poetry is characterised by realism. The

modern poet is a keen observer of the various tendencies of his times which are being put by him in poetry. This modern note of realism had been sounded by Chaucer long ago in the 14th century. He made a thorough study of his time in its varied aspects and gave expression to its hopes and aspirations, its fears and doubts in *The Canterbury Tales*. He reflected his century not in fragments but as a whole and was its chronicler as Froissart had been of France during the same times. He had the innate instinct to catch within his purview the soul of his generation in all its fulness and its depth. He had the seeing eye, the retentive memory, the judgement to select, and the capacity to expound.

His Narrative Art

Chaucer made notable contribution to the art of story-telling and what Morris did later on in *Earthly Paradise* was achieved by him in *The Canterbury Tales*. He is the supreme story teller. In his stories, the narration, in spite of certain digressions and philosophical reflections, is straight forward and unhampered. He introduces humour in his narration and makes his stories life like fault of the times, but "when he rises above the weaknesses common to time, he is terse, direct and vivacious".

Characterisation

Chaucer made significant contribution to the art of characterisation. In the words of A.C. Ward - "Chaucer is the first great painter of character because he is the first great observer of it among European writers. He presents his characters in a masterly manner. His characters are both individual and types. They are timeless creations on a time determined stage."

His characters like those of Shakespeare are life like and we can not forget them. The Knight, The Friar, The Pardoner, The Wife of Bath, Doctor of Physic are living characters and have an eternal freshness about them. Chaucer's characters, no doubt, belong to their age, but they are also of all time.

Humour and Pathos

— In the literature of the 14th cent. when so few poets seem to have any perception of the fun in life, Chaucer's humour is invigorating and delightful. Chaucer is in the grand tradition of the great humorists and while his humour may have the peculiar English tinge and flavour yet it has also the essence of all true humour. This places him in the very first line of humorists - Shakespeare, Cervantes, Moliere and Dickens. His genial humour cuts across the barriers of time and customs, language and idiom and exhilarates us like a tonic as it did the prince and clown, the clergy and laity of a feudal age.

Chaucer lays less emphasis on pathos but it is not overlooked. In the poetry of Chaucer the sentiment is human and unforced. We have excellent examples of pathos in The tale of the Prioresse and The Legend of Good Women.

Chaucer's pathos is not sentimental. He exhibits sympathy for inevitable sorrow. This distinguishes him from Boccaccio and makes him a precursor of Hamlet and Othello. He is not a sentimentalist; he does not go out of his way for pathetic effect but in the Clerk's Tale and the tales narrated by the mining Prioresse; he shows an immediate unforced, unfaltering sympathy which can hardly be paralleled.

Dramatic Elements in his Poetry

Chaucer has been called 'a dramatist in all but the fact'.

We can find all elements of drama in his tales — story, characterization, dialogue, conflict and setting. The admirable conception of character, the consummate skill with which each is sustained and developed, and the nature, life and spirit of the dialogue, abundantly prove that if the drama had been known in Chaucer's time as a branch of living literature, he might have attained to as high an excellence in comedy as any English or continental writer.

Chaucer's method of narration is dramatic. All his characters talk in dramatic manner. The most sustained dramatic character is that of the Host. The spirit of comedy pervades through his tales.

Language and Versification

In the sphere of versification, Chaucer made substantial contributions. He cast aside alliteration, and doggerel rhyme, and employed three principal metres: the eight syllable line rhyming in couplets as in 'The Book of Duches', the ten syllable line as used in "Prologue to Canterbury Tales" and the same line arranged in seven line stanzas known as 'Rhyme Royal' as used in 'Troilus'. He had a firm grasp on true way of wedding the stressed and syllabic systems by ~~accomo~~ accommodating metrical ictus to national accent.

Chaucer's appeal to modern times

Chaucer makes the profoundest and deepest appeal to the readers of modern times. They recognise in Chaucer not a man of remote antiquity but essentially a modern poet; living in an age with all signs of modernism. The age in which

Chaucer lived was essentially at the head of the modern age, for it broke off with middle ages and heralded the birth of the new age of the Renaissance. Chaucer lived in a time of great religious, political and literary activity, not so much at the end of middle ages as at the beginning of the modern world. Chaucer seems to be the exponent and leader of a modern age and appeals to the modern readers as if he actually belonged to them.

