

Chaucer : An Introduction

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 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 poetry, introduced minute observation of life around him, gave vivid and clear descriptions of the conditions of his times, excelled in characterisation, humor, pathos, made narration an art and above all gave a new form and shape to the language and versification.

A National Poet -

Chaucer was the first great national poet of England giving full expression to the new hopes and aspirations of the 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. In the picture of the Canterbury pilgrimage, with the frankness of criticism prevailing among all its members, with the strength of its public opinion, with its power of regulating its own affairs we find, what as yet had nowhere else appeared in the modern European literature, the image of an organized nation. The foundation of Chaucer's art lies in English life and English character.

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 and living. There may be long speeches in his stories, a common fault of the times, but "when he rises above the weakness common to the time, he is terse, direct and vivacious." As a teller of merry tales in verse he has been equalled only by Burns and by Burns only in Tom O' Shanter.

Characterisation :-

Chaucer made significant contribution to the art of characterisation. In the words of A.C. Wald — "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 individuals and types. They are timeless creations on a time-determined stage. Every age in Canterbury pilgrimage is the pilgrimage of the world and the pilgrims the epitome of mankind. 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, no doubt, belong to their age, but they are also of all time.

His Humour and Pathos —

In the literature of the 14th century 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, Rabelais, 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.

As a precursor of the novel —

In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales* we have the seeds of the novel which was cultivated by others at a later stage. The Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* is the prologue to modern fiction.

classmate

Date _____

Page _____

The tales with their characters and their atmosphere are novels in miniature. Delightful as are these tales of the Canterbury pilgrims, yet the poem in which Chaucer moves towards the novel is *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Chaucer makes the profoundest and deepest appeal to the readers of the 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 modern age, for it broke off with Middle Ages and heralded the birth of the new age of the Renaissance.
