

Chaucer as a Narrative Poet



Chaucer is rightly regarded as the supreme narrative poet of his country and his Canterbury Tales is a standing monument of his genius as a narrator in verse. Other writers have greater monuments, but nobody has Chaucer's excellence of narration in verse. He was inspired in his art of narration by the example of Middle Ages wherein story telling was an art, and a true poet was regarded to be a story-teller or *trouvère*. In the good old days it was believed that a perfect story should be full of action and should have truth as its basis. It should be an artistic work with unity running through the various threads of the story. Chaucer had before him this noble conception of a story, and he had the guidance of Boccaccio's 'Decameron' in his venture as a teller of tales in the Canterbury Tales. He knew that the 'Decameron' was not a perfect work since there was practically no movement and variety in the action of the stories and they were mostly mechanical and monotonous in character. He set about his task with an advantage, for all that he had to do was to avoid the pit falls of Boccaccio, and strike new lines in story telling, by basing his stories on a straight forward and direct course with minimum of description and moralizing, so that the reader's attention could be caught in the narration of the tale."

Like Shakespeare, Chaucer rarely took the trouble of inventing a plot for his stories. His tales have no originality of plot. He borrowed his plots from Latin, French and Italian sources. He borrowed his plot but his style was his own. By the alchemy of his genius he changed the brass into gold. He had originally planned to narrate a number of tales in 'The Canterbury Tales' but all that he has left behind are twenty four tales differing

Character like the characters who narrate them. These tales can be divided according to their subject matter. Of the twenty four tales some are romantic tales, some are sublime and some centre round the life of saints. The Knight relates the story of chivalry and war and the Clerk gives the story of Griselda's wifely devotion. The Squire narrates the story of eastern magic. The Pardoner's Tale is a moral allegory and Nun's Priest's Tale is an episode in 'Reynard the Fox'. Thus of the twenty four tales some are pious and some profane but each story is in perfect conformity and harmony with the narrator.

All the tales of Chaucer have movement and variety. The story moves ahead uninterruptedly and there is a constant progress in the narration. The conduct of the story goes on unabated. The action of the story is not the same. It varies according to the nature of story. Each story is so artistically narrated that it gives rise to a sequence of fresh tales. The Wife of Bath's views about marriage furnish a quarrel between the Friar and the Summoner and a fresh story starts. Thus the narration does not become tedious and boring. In his narrative art Chaucer can moralise at places and generalise very unobtrusively. He can be philosophical and didactic. The tales often end on a didactic note.

In Chaucer's narrative art, there are well marked dramatic touches. He breaks away from the hold of personification and allegory, and becomes a dramatist introducing life and vigour in his narration. He gives a new life to an old story and unravels the complexities of sentiment by his hints as a dramatic observer. The deft touches and the imagination with which he brings up the personality of a character and the sense of humour and pathos make for dramatic elements in his stories. Some of his stories can be easily turned in to plays and acted on the

Stage: The style is appropriate to each story. It is sometimes grave and dignified, sometimes racy and colloquial, sometimes poetic, sometimes decorative and the climax is carefully worked up. It is generally the language of prose rhymed.

Albert has found certain shortcomings and faults in Chaucer's narrative skill. His words are worth quoting: 'As a story teller Chaucer employs somewhat tortuous methods, but his narrative possesses a curious stealthy speed. His stories viewed strictly as stories have most of the weakness of his generation; a fondness for long speeches, for pedantic digressions on such subjects as dreams and ethical problems, and for long explanations when none are necessary. 'Troilus and Criseyde', heavy with long speeches is an example of his prolixity, and the 'Knight's Tale' of baffling complexity, and over abundant in detail, reveals his haphazard and drawing methods; yet both contain many admirable narrative passages. But when he rises above the weaknesses common to the time he is terse, direct and vivacious.'

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