Dr. Md Sharique Haider
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Maharaja College

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The Canterbury Tales – Prologue as a Picture of 14th-Century English Society

The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the most vivid and realistic portrayals of 14th-century English society. It presents a detailed cross-section of medieval life through the description of twenty-nine pilgrims who gather at the Tabard Inn to travel to Canterbury. Through these characters, Chaucer offers a panoramic view of social classes, professions, values, and moral conditions of his time.

1. Representation of the Three Estates

Medieval society was traditionally divided into three estates:

The Clergy (those who pray)

The Nobility (those who fight)

The Peasantry (those who work)

Chaucer includes characters from all these groups, making the Prologue a miniature model of society.

The Knight represents the nobility. He is brave, honorable, and idealistic, reflecting the fading code of chivalry.

The Parson represents the ideal clergy—poor but rich in virtue.

The Plowman represents the honest working class.

Characters like the Monk, Friar, and Pardoner show the corruption in the Church.

The Merchant, Doctor, and Lawyer represent the rising middle class.

Thus, Chaucer does not focus only on the upper class but includes every level of society.

2. Realism and Social Observation

Chaucer's Prologue is realistic because he presents people as they truly are, not as ideal figures. He describes:

Their clothes

Their physical appearance

Their professions

Their habits and behavior

For example:

The Prioress tries to appear refined and aristocratic.

The Monk loves hunting instead of religious duties.

The Friar is more interested in money than spirituality.

Through such details, Chaucer shows the moral weaknesses and hypocrisy of many religious figures. This reflects the declining moral condition of the Church in 14th-century England.

3. Social Mobility and the Rising Middle Class

The Prologue also reflects social change. During the 14th century:

Trade and commerce were growing.

The middle class was becoming powerful.

People could improve their social position.

Characters like the Merchant and the Guildsmen show this new economic power. They are wealthy and confident. Chaucer's inclusion of them shows that society was no longer controlled only by nobles and clergy.

4. Irony and Satire

Chaucer uses gentle irony and satire to criticize society. He does not openly attack people but describes them in a way that exposes their flaws.

For example:

The Pardoner sells fake religious relics.

The Summoner is corrupt and takes bribes.

The Friar prefers rich people over the poor.

This satire shows corruption in religious and legal institutions.

5. Balance Between Ideal and Corrupt Characters

Chaucer is not completely negative. He presents both good and bad characters:

Good characters: Knight, Parson, Plowman

Corrupt characters: Monk, Friar, Pardoner

This balance makes the Prologue fair and realistic. It reflects both the virtues and the weaknesses of 14th-century society.

6. Human Nature and Universal Themes

Although it describes medieval England, the Prologue also reflects universal human qualities:

Greed

Vanity

Hypocrisy

Honesty

Kindness

Chaucer shows that human nature remains the same in every age.

Conclusion

The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales is a vivid social document of 14th-century England. Through a wide range of characters from different social classes, Chaucer presents a realistic, balanced, and sometimes satirical picture of medieval society. It reflects the structure of the three estates, the corruption of the Church, the rise of the middle class, and the complexities of human nature.

Therefore, the Prologue is not only an introduction to the tales but also a valuable historical and social portrait of medieval English life.