

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

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Discuss the Prologue as a Picture of 14th-Century English Society

The General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer is often described as a vivid and realistic portrait of 14th-century English society. Through the description of thirty pilgrims who gather at the Tabard Inn to go on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, Chaucer presents a cross-section of medieval life. The Prologue is not merely an introduction to stories; it is a social document that reflects the political, religious, economic, and moral conditions of the time.

1. Representation of the Three Estates

Medieval society was traditionally divided into three main groups:

Those who fight (the nobility),

Those who pray (the clergy), and

Those who work (the common people).

Chaucer includes representatives from all these estates, thus giving a complete picture of society.

The Nobility:

The Knight represents the feudal order. He is described as brave, honourable, and experienced in battles. His character shows the ideal values of chivalry such as truth, honour, and courtesy. However, his son, the Squire, reflects the changing values of the younger generation. He is more interested in love, fashion, and music than in warfare. Through them, Chaucer shows both tradition and transition within the noble class.

The Clergy:

The Church was very powerful in the 14th century, but it was also facing corruption. Chaucer presents both good and bad churchmen. The Parson is poor but virtuous, practising what he preaches. In contrast, characters like the Monk, Friar, Pardoner, and Summoner show moral corruption. The Monk prefers hunting over prayer. The Friar is more interested in money than charity. The Pardoner sells fake relics to make profit.

Through satire, Chaucer exposes the hypocrisy and greed within the Church, reflecting the religious decline of the age.

The Common People:

Chaucer also portrays merchants, craftsmen, farmers, and professionals. The Merchant reflects the growing middle class and the rise of trade. The Wife of Bath represents an independent and experienced woman who challenges traditional gender roles. The Plowman symbolizes honesty and hard work among peasants. The Doctor shows the connection between medicine and astrology. Each character reflects a particular section of society.

2. Social Mobility and Change

The 14th century was a time of social change due to events like the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt. These events weakened the feudal system and allowed the middle class to rise. In the Prologue, we see characters like the Merchant and the Franklin, who are wealthy but not noble by birth. This shows the growth of a new economic class. Chaucer captures this transformation realistically.

3. Realism and Individualization

Unlike earlier medieval writers who portrayed characters as types, Chaucer gives them individual personalities. He describes their dress, habits, speech, and physical features in detail. For example, the Wife of Bath's gap teeth and red stockings reflect her bold personality. The Pardoner's long hair and soft voice hint at his questionable morality. Such realistic details make the Prologue a lively social record.

4. Use of Satire and Irony

Chaucer does not openly criticize society; instead, he uses gentle humour and irony. He often pretends to admire characters while subtly revealing their faults. This balanced tone makes his social criticism more effective. The Prologue thus becomes both entertaining and meaningful.

5. Unity Through Pilgrimage

The idea of a pilgrimage brings together people from different classes. This framework symbolizes that all humans, regardless of social rank, share a common spiritual journey. It also allows Chaucer to show how different social groups interact with each other.

Conclusion

The General Prologue is a detailed and balanced picture of 14th-century English society. Chaucer presents a wide range of characters from different social classes and exposes both virtues and vices. Through realism, satire, and vivid characterization, he

turns the Prologue into a valuable historical and literary document. It reflects not only the structure of medieval society but also its moral weaknesses and changing values. Thus, the Prologue stands as a remarkable social commentary and a true mirror of its age.