Unit -1 ❑ Chaucer : Prologue to Canterbury Tales

Structure

1.1 ❑ Objectives

This unit/module introduces you to Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1340—c.1400), his life and works and to his artistic masterpiece, The **Prologue** to his **Canterbury Tales.** Reading the various sections you will begin to have a detailed knowledge of various dimensions of the Prologue (eg. characterization, humour, social life in the fourteenth century). Chaucer wrote in Middle English and, as this particular mode and style of English may at first be a little unfamiliar to you the first two hundred lines of the Prologue have been appended at the end (the original Chaucerian language together with an interlinear modern English translation) so that you may become familiar and comfortable with Middle English.

1.2 ❑ Introducing Chaucer : Life and Works

Though **The Canterbury Tales** and **Troilus and Criseyde** are the most widely known of Chaucer's poems, he also wrote four ambitious dream allegories (two of which were left unfinished), a considerable body of lyric poetry, translations of Boethius and at least a part of the **Romance of the Rose,** and a technical scientific treatise on the use of the astrolabe in astronomical observations and computations. The volume and variety of his literary production are all the more remarkable when we remember that, though his poetry won royal favour and thus aided his career as a civil servant, it was never his primary occupation. His life was crowded with public business ranging all the way from soldiering in France and carrying out diplomatic missions in Italy to serving as a member of Parliament from Kent, as Controller of Customs of the Port of London, and as Clerk of the King's Works, in charge of docks, walls, bridges, sewers, etc., on the lower Thames.

The England in which Chaucer played his many roles was in transition between the Middle Ages and the modern world. The feudal system still existed, but it was becoming increasingly easy for serfs to run away from the estates where they belonged and find employment in the cities, or, with the seller's market in labour created by the Black Death, to hire themselves out as independent agricultural laborers. The king still exerted tremendous power, but the rise of the cities and of large-scale manufacturing and trade had created a wealthy and influential middle class of merchants and artisans who governed London. The royal court however, was still a source of power and pageantry, and it continued to give an artistic and intellectual stimulus to the courtiers. Also, a number of complex causes, including the Hundred Years' War with France, were producing a national consciousness quite different from the earlier regional and personal loyalties. Englanf was becoming a nation, and her citizens were proud of her.

Chaucer's father was a member of the rising middle class, a prosperous wine merchant with modest connections at court. We know nothing of the poet's formal studies (if any), but we do know that at some time during the course of his life he acquired a good deal of knowledge of bookkeeping, civil law, philosophy, and astronomy, and learned to handle French, Italian, and Latin competently. In his teens he served as a page in the household of King Edward III's second son. Later he rose to the rank of Esquire in the royal household and received a stipend for life from the royal exchequer.

It is customary to divide Chaucer's literary production into three periods, according to the dominant influence under which he was writing : a **French period** (to 1372), an **Italian period** (1373-85), and an **English period** (1386-1400). This division is useful and essentially true if we remember that the periods are not so much successive as cumulative. **The Canterbury Tales,** for example, belongs to the English period and is dominated by

the contemporary English scene, but it still owes a great deal to both French and Italian models; and many of the Tales themselves are directly based on French and Italian sources.

Chaucer began his literary career under the influence of a medieval French literature which included satires, romances, fabliaux, and such contemporary poets as Deschamps, Machaut, and Froissart and the allegorical mode of literary expression. Under French influence he began his translation of the **Romance of the Rose,** and, more important, produced his first ambitious original poem, **The Book of the Duchess** (1369). This is an elegy on the death of Blanche, the wife of Chaucer's patron John of Gaunt, written in the form and manner of contemporary French poets, and with considerable borrowing from them. But already in this poem, as in the other dream-allegories that followed, there are distinctive marks of Chaucer's individual genius—the use of the setting to intensify the dreamlike mood of the poem, the sense of immediacy in the portrait of the bereaved knight, and the characteristic flashes of psychological insight. With remarkable originality and tact, Chaucer made himself merely a well-meaning but obtuse listener and put the praise of Blanche into the mouth of her husband.

In 1372-73 Chaucer went to Italy (probably for the-first time) to arrange a commercial treaty with the Genoese. This journey, reinforced by another visit to Italy in 1378, had a tremendous effect on Chaucer. Dante, dead for half a century, was already a classic, and Petrarch and Boccaccio were nearing the end of their literary careers. Not only did Chaucer draw heavily on the works of these men for the rest of his life, but they taught him to understand the importance of narrative structure and technique, to individualize his characters and give them dramatic intensity, and to seek the rhythms and idioms of popular speech. Thus the poems of Chaucer's Italian period show progress in his mastery of rhetoric, technique, style, and meter. **The House of Fame** (c. 1377-86) and **The Legend of Good Women** (1380-86) are still dream-allegories containing many of the old familiar features of this French literary type, but Chaucer breaks with the conventional patterns with his broader range of ideas, his greater subtlety of characterization, and h'is attitude of humorous detachment. In **The House of Fame** the poet is carried by an eagle to the House of Fame, where he is to hear important tidings of love. The poem breaks off just as these tidings are about to be announced, but the ostensible purpose of the poem could hardly have been as rewarding as the comic characterization of the learned, vicacious, and somewhat pedantic eagle. **The Parliament of Fowls** tells how the birds assemble on St. Valentine's day to choose their mates, and the courtly and chivalrous eagles, platitudinous goose, common-sense duck, romantic dove, and jibing cuckoo are masterpieces of comic satire. The poem give a more comprehensive picture of society as presented through the different birds. Though still allegorical in mode, Chaucer is moving out of the limited aristocratic world of courtly love. **The Legend of Good Women** ("Legend of Cupid's Saints") has a remarkably fresh and original prologue telling how Chaucer came to write

a set of accounts of women who—whatever their other failings—were faithful in love even unto death. Chaucer left it unfinished, and it is not hard to see why. It calls for too much repetition of what is essentially the same story, and the poet admits at one point that he is becoming bored with writing about these melancholy jilted females. The great masterpiece of Chaucer's Italian period, however, is **Troilus and Criseyde,** an amazingly rich and original work inspite of the fact that it is based on a narrative poem by Boccaccio and follows the well-worn conventions of courtly love. A brief summary of the story could be given. **Troilus** and **Criseyde** comes before the **Legend of Good Women** which was written as a kind of expiation for having created the character of Criseyde who became a prototype of the faithless women.

The great work of the English period is **The Canterbury Tales,** with its realistic setting in contemporary England. Here we immediately notice a difference from the other periods : the1 English influence is not a literary one, like the French and Italian, but is simply the influence of the breadth, scope, and zest of Chaucer's own land and age. The specific literary influences are still French, Italian, and Latin, but the setting is no longer in dreamworlds or in ancient Troy : it is on the road between London and Canterbury. Into this setting Chaucer could pour the whole wealth of his reading, his knowledge, his wide experience of men, and his humorous tolerance.

Even when following earlier writers, Chaucer was always an innovator. He introduced Italian literatrue to England. He was the first to use many of the meters and stanza forms which have become standard in English poetry. He was the first English poet to deal extensively with the contemporary scene, to draw sharply individualized portraits, to analyze his characters psychologically, to impress his readers as a personality in his own right. It is a tribute to him that since his death each age has admired him, but for different reasons ranging all the way from his satire on religious corruption to his humanism and his realism. Even at his funeral he made an innovation which established a new tradition, for he was buried in what has come to be "The Poets' Corner" of Westminister Abbey.

1.3 ❑ Canterbury Tales : A Brief History

The Canterbury Tales, is Chaucer's most celebrated work probably designed about 1387 and extending to 17,000 lines in prose and verse of various metres (though the predominant form is the rhyming couplet). **The General Prologue** describes the meeting of 29 pilgrims in the Tabard Inn in Southwark (in fact they add up to 31; It has been suggested that the prioress's "preestes three" in line 164 may be an error since only one 'Nun's Priest' is mentioned in the body of the work). Detailed pen-pictures are given of 21 of them, vividly described but perhaps corresponding to traditional lists of the orders of society, clerical and lay (see J. Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire. 1973). The host Harry Bailley proposes that the pilgrims should shorten the teduins of the road by

telling four stories each, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back; he will accompany them and award a free supper on their return to the teller of the best story. The work is incomplete; only 23 pilgrims tell stories, and there are only 24 stories told altogether (Chaucer tells two). In the scheme the stories are linked by narrative exchanges between the pilgrims and by prologues and epilogues to the tales; but this aspect of the work is also very incomplete. It is uncertain even in what order the stories are meant to come; the evidence of the manuscripts and of geographical references is conflicting, as is the scholarly interpretation of that evidence. The order generally followed is that of the Ellesmere MS, followed in the best complete edition of Chaucer, F.N. Robinson's (2nd edn, 1957)

1.4 ❑ Them Narrative Framework

The narrative framework for a series of tales had a far-reaching ancestry. The medieval world knew the oriental collections **of The Thousand and One Nights** and **The Seven Sages,** and Ovid's **Metamorphoses** where the device also occurs. Chaucer and his friend, John Gower, were both experimenting in the late fourteenth century with the form which, some years before, Boccaccio had used repeatedly, in his **Filocolo, Admeto,** and **Decameron.** As in **The Canterbury Tales,** Boccaccio's excuse for the collection, the real purpose of the work, is the entertainment of a social group brought together by external circumstances; Boccaccio's tales are linked by connecting passages of narrative and conversation; all is under the direction of a presiding officer. Chaucer elsewhere drew considerable inspiration from Boccaccio, but with the narrative framework the resemblances are superficial. Boccaccio's tales are told in a garden in the **Filocolo,** in a wooded meadow in **Admeto.** In the **Decameron** some movement from place to place occurs, but there is doubt as to whether Chaucer knew the **Decameron.** Anyhow, Boccaccio's company in each work is only slightly individualized and the narrators belong all to the same social class as, in Decameron, to the attendants who accompanied the courtly travellers. There is nothing in Boccaccio's framework comparable with the vivid representation from most walks of English medieval life in the lively company of "sondry folk" who won literary immortality at the Tabard. It seems even less likely that Chaucer drew his chief inspiration from the framed tales of **Giovanni Sercambi** of Lucca. Sercambi's **Novelle,** C. 1385, based on an earlier work now lost, also described a large party of many callings and classes, journeying together, visiting shrines, and telling tales both on the road and when they stopped at an inn. Sercambi's people, however, are a characterless crew, and it was Sercambi himself who related all the stories.

It was surely the inspiration of genius when Chaucer made his framework a pilgrimage and introduced all sorts and conditions of men whom he had met and observed in his own busy life. The secular pageant from actual workaday England as well as the church figures could be plausibly assembled with such a common devotional intent.

THE SERIES OF PORTRAITS

A. series of portraits was not a novelty. **Benoit de Sainte-Maure's Roman de Troie,** one of the sources for Chaucer's own **Troilus and Criseyde,** contained an unbroken sequence of thirty heroes, but they all turned out very much alike in rank and occupation. More individualized portraits are to be found in the various series of allegorical figures after the manner of the **Roman de la Rose** or in the processions of the personified Deadly Sins; these were clearly a formative influence. Book V of **Piers Plowman** depicted the seven Deadly Sins one after the other without intervening narrative or connective, and also assigned them to different occupations and professions.

1.4.1 The Narrative Framework : Continued

In the **Canterbury Tales** narrative art is at the point of becoming drama. The poem is the culmination of Chaucer's dramatic-poetic development of English speech; and something unaccountably new in mediaeval literature. The pilgrims are first presented in the great Prologue with a vividness not attained before in English, even by Chaucer, and seldom since. Thereafter, in the comic interludes between the tales, they begin to move talk and act react. The **Wife of Bath's** preamble—which is twice, the length of her tale—is the Wife herself talking, enacting scenes and dialogues between herself and her several husbands, dramatizing her private life in front of an audience; her tale itself is an Arthurian romance. The **Pardoner's Prologue** and Tale are another character's self-dramatization **The Canterbury Tales** thus presents a company of distinct and individual people talking; the tales are a part of themselves and their talk. The interest is not simply in the tale—vivid as it nearly always is in itself—but, at the same time, in the teller. The variety of the tales reproduces and fulfils the initial human variety. Each tale and the prologue that precedes it dramatically projects a distinct person. The poem is the beginning of English dramatic and fictional literature as a whole. It is an indication of the depth and maturity of Chaucer's daringly achieved vision of human life.

The Canterbury Tales is the Human Comedy of the Middle Ages. The tone of Chaucer's company of English folk is as a whole one of jollity; and, scandalously careless in relation to eternity as several of the company appear to be, this jollity accords with the attitude of grateful acceptance of life which is the tone of the **Canterbury Tales** as a whole. The characters of the comedy are so vivid that we feel them (as Dryden did) to be our immediate contemporaries and are apt to miss the depth of difference of their background. Life in its totality—both 'good' and 'evil'—-is accepted as exactly what it is observed to be.

1.5 ❑ Aspects of Chaucer's Prologue

1.5.1 Prologue : The Opening Lines

In the opening lines of the Prologue [see text of Prologue—first 200 lines with paraphrase—appended later] springtime is characterized in terms of procreation, and a pilgrimage of people to Canterbury is just one of the many manifestations of the life thereby produced. The phallicism of the opening lines presents the impregnating of a female March by a male April, and a marriage of Water and Earth. The marriage is repeated and varied immediately as a fructifying of "holt and heeth" by Zephirus, a marriage of air and earth. This mode of symbolism and these symbols as parts of **a rite of spring** have a long background of tradition. Out of this context of the quickening of the earth presented naturally and symbolically in the broadest terms, the **Prologue** comes to the pilgrimage and treats pilgrimage first as an event in the calendar of nature, one aspect of the general springtime surge of human energy and longing. There are the attendant suggestions of the renewal of human mobility after the rigor and confinement of winter, the revival of wayfaring now that the ways are open. The horizon extends to distant shrines and foreign lands, and the attraction of the strange and far-away is included before the vision narrows and focusses upon its "English specifications and the pilgrimage to the shrine at Canterbury with the vows and gratitude that send pilgrims there. One way of regarding the structure of this opening passage would emphasize the magnificent progression from the broadest inclusive generality to the firmest English specification, from the whole western tradition of the celebration of spring (including, as Cook pointed out, such a non-English or very doubtfully English detail as "the droghte of March") to a local event of English society and English Christendom, from natural forces in their most general operation to a very specific and Christian manifestation of those forces. And yet one may regard the structure in another way, too; if, in the calendar of nature, the passage moves from general to particular, does it not, in the calendar of piety, move from nature to something that includes and oversees nature? Does not the passage move from an activity naturally generated and impelled to a governed activity, from force to telos? Does not the passage move from Aphrodite and amor in their secular operation to the sacred embrace of "the hooly blisful martir" and of **amor dei?** Combination of religions and secular instincts leads on to the sustained ivory of whole poem.

The translation from nature to supernature is emphasized by the contrast between the healthful physical vigour of the opening lines and the reference to sickness that appears in line 18. On the one hand, it is physical vitality which conditions the pilgrimage; on the other hand, sickness occasions pilgrimage. It is, in fact, rather startling to come upon the word 'seeke' at the end of this opening passage, because it is like a breath of winter across the landscape of spring. "Whan that they were seeke" may, of course, refer

literally to illnesses of the winter just past, but; in any event, illness belongs symbolically to the inclement season. There is also however, a strong parallelism between the beginning and end of this passage, a parallelism that has to do with **restorative power.** The physical vitality of the opening is presented as restorative of the dry earth; the power of the saint is present as restorative of the sick. The seasonal restoration of nature parallels spiritual kind of restoration that knows no season; the supernatural kind of restoration involves a wielding and directing of the forces of nature. The **Prologue** begins, then, by presenting a double view of the Canterbury pilgrimage; the pilgrimage is one tiny manifestation of a huge tide of life, but then, too, the tide of life ebbs and flows in response to the power which' the pilgrimage acknowledges, the power symbolized by "the hooly blisful rnartir."

After line 18 the process of particularizing is continued, moving from "that season1 just defined to a day and to a place and to a person in Southwark at the Tabard, and thence to the portraits of the pilgrims. The double view of the pilgrimage is enhanced and extended by the portrait where it appears, in one aspect, as a range of motivation. This range of motivation is from the sacred to the secular and on to the profane—'profane' in the sense of motivations actually subversive of the sacred. All the pilgrims are, in fact, granted an ostensible sacred motive; all of them #re seeking the shrine. The distances that we are made aware of are both within some of the portraits, where a gulf yawns-between ostensible and actual motivation, and between the portraits, where the motivation of the Knight and the Parson is near one end of the spectrum, and the motivation of the Summoner and the Pardoner near the other end. There is such an impure but blameless mixture as the motivation of the Prioress; there is the secular pilgrimage of the Wife of Bath, impelled so powerfully and frankly by Saint Venus rather than drawn by Saint Thomas, and goaded by a Martian desire to acquire and dominate another husband; in the case of the Prioress, an inescapable doubt as to the quality of amor hesitates between the sacred and secular, and in the case of the thoroughly secular Wife of Bath, doubt hesitates between the secular and the profane while the portrait shows the ostensible motive that belongs to all the pilgrims shaken without ever being subverted, contradicted perhaps, brazenly opposed, but still acknowledged and offered.

Notes :

1. Chaucer's English countryside and English pilgrims are inspired by the vitalising and creative forces and powers of spring - in the same way as Rabindranath found spring knocking at his door ("Aji Basanto jagrato daarey") to make his heart leap up with joy like a dancing peacock in springtime. This is an universal feeling that spring is a creative, festive time of joy when even the birds sleep with one eye open in order not to miss the sights and colours of a spring night: "And smale fowleys maken melodye/That sleepen al the nyght with open eye."

2. Another representative and great Anglo-American poet 7 centuries later opens his

mini-epic of modern man's spiritual pilgrimage from draught to restoration with poignant nostalgia for the lost wholeness of Chaucer's world. For Eliot "April is the cruellest month/ Mixing memory and desire". Wars, catastrophes, loss of ideals and illusions, the break-up and colia'pse of cultures and civilizations, decadence and disintegration, spiritual and emotional atrophy and the Death of God have all intervened during the last 7 centuries making Eliot's world far removed from Chaucer's. For us trapped in the modern wasteland spring fails to come and revive us—we can only feel nostalgia for a lost springtime of life. (But later in the closing stages of the **Wasteland** the rain impregnates the dry, arid earth as it does in the opening lines of Chaucer's Prologue, and vitality and restoration return to the Wasteland.

This is a significant example of what postmodernists call **Intertextuality**—Eliot plays a counterpoint with Chaucer's text: a great modern poet begins his great modern poem playing upon (and drawing and deriving from) a great medieval poet's greatest medieval-modern poem (between the two Aprils is a vast gap as also a deep and resonant relationship).

1.5.2 Prologue as Protrait-Callery/Social Document/Picture of Men and Manners

A great poet like Chaucer reflects the ethos, the body of his age in his works. As Pope's poetry helps us to understand the 18th Cent.; as Tennyson and Browning's the Victorian Age: as Eliot's the 20th Cent, post-war wasteland of Europe, so too Chaucer's poetry in the Prologue and Canterbury Tales gives us a clear picture of 14th cent, men and manners. If in his Divine Comedy Dante presents the spirit of the Medieval Age, Chaucer presents us with its body.

1. Chaucer's 29 pilgrims include all the different sections of society except the highest and the lowest classes. Chaucer was unwilling to be dragged into any kind of political controversy so he left out the king & his Court (the Noblemen) and Hie serfs from his Prologue. These two sections were in bloody conflict with each other in Chaucer's time (cf. the Peasant's Revolt of the 1380s alluded to in the Nun's Priest's Tale). Also it is not probable, that the Nobles and the serfs would have accompanied the pilgrims (the Noble would have made their own V.I.P. arrangement, while the serfs being like bonded-labour did not have the freedom—economic or otherwise—to travel about and so Chaucer does not bring them into the Prologue.

2. In his Prologue Chaucer represents the three main orders of society :

(a) The Chivalric order or the Military class (represented by the Knight-Squire-Yeoman) which protected the life and property of the medieval people.

(b) The clerical, Ecclesiastical ftrder or Priestly Class (represented by 9 Church functionaries—Monk, Friar, Prioress, Parson though protected the souls of the Medieval people.

(c) The Agricultural Order or the Farming class (the Plowman) on whom depended the whole economy of the country.

3. Most of the professions of the day have their representatives among the pilgrims—the Medieval astrologer-Doctor, the lawyer, the guildsmen, the Merchant (testifying to the rise of England as a commercial and trading power cf. England being called "a nation of shop-keepers" and Shakespeare's play **Merchant of Venice**—pointing to the development of Mercantilism during the 14th to 16th cents.); the pirate-shipman (pointing to the rising sea-power of England); the scholar of Oxenford (symbolising the passion for learning that animated Europe during the late Medieval Age and the Renascence); the Millef, the Reeve et al.'

Most of Chaucer's characters are both individuals and types (i.e. representatives of the class to which they belong)—theirparticular faults and foibles and idiosyncracies are blended with their general and typical qualities. The pilgrims are not only individual and typical, they are also universal because fundamental human qualities that da riot change from age to age, are revealed their individualised pilgrims so that we can recognise ourselves in them. An exception is the Wyf of Bath - perhaps the most vital, and enjoyable character among all the pilgrims. With her unbounded zest for life (five husbands at church-door apart from other childhood sweethearts), her arrogance and dominating personality (she always led the church procession, dressed finely and colourfully, loved mixed company during pilgrimages) she is a far-cry from the subjugated women of the Middle Ages. She is not a "type" but a powerful individual character whose dynamic personality prefigures the New Women of the Renascence and Shakespeare's dominating heroines. "Gattoothed", highly-experienced in the arts of the sex war she remains the most engaging and human of all Chaucer's pilgrims.

4. Chaucer was perhaps influenced in his plan for the Canterbury Tales by Boccacci but the Prologue as a portrait—gallery of the tellers of the Canterbury tales is highly original —an yet unsurpassed mirror held up to 14th Cent, life and society, men, morals and manners—a work of creative realism where the whole body of the age is contained in concrete terms. If Dante gave us the "Divine Comedy", then Chaucer gives us the "Human Comedy" of the Medieval ages.

1.5.3 Art of Characterisation

1. Medieval characterisation was primitive and one-dimensional in technique eg. the Miracle & Morality plays where personified abstractions of virtues & vices, abound. Characters like **Hate, Love, Malice, Justice, purity, cleanliness, Mercy** are "flat", one-dimensional, symbolic figures. They lack the "round" flesh and blood solidity of post - Renascence characters of poetry or drama. Chaucer started his apprenticeship in letters under this primitive medieval influence—cf. the characters in his translation **of Romance**

of the Rose. But he soon outgrew this primitive technique and in the Prologue and Tales we have rounded personalities of flesh and blood, multidimensional and complex.

2. Chaucer's characters have two faces: they are both **typical** (representative of their class and age) and **individual,** possessing particular and specific characteristics, expressing a unique personality. Chaucer sees his characters from this **double perspective** of the specific and particular, the generic and typical this is his **double vision** or **bifocal technique** eg. **Prioresse (Individual features** : name, schooling and origin in a particular village. specific jewellery and inscription with mono, physical features. **Typical features:** negligence of religions duties, keeping pets against the law, imitating court ladies and elite etiquette at meals etc.)

3. Chaucer's characters **are the vehicle of his Humour.** Chancer's humour arises from his characters failing to practice what they preach, from the incongruity between their public mask and their private face eg. the money—the hungry Doctor for whom epidemics are like festivals; or the church characters who keep a moral exterior but are inwardly rotten, corrupt, and irresponsible; the Lawyer who seemed more busy than he was: the Merchant who dressed elegantly and lived fashionably but was actually in debt.

Chaucer's humour also inheres in the ideosyncrasies of his characters, their tricks of speech (the drunken Summoner who keeps on repeating one Latin phrase) and their particularised physical features (the wart on the Miller's nose, the cook's boil).

4. To define his characters Chaucer sometimes utilises two basic kinds of imagery : **beast imagery and nature imagery** eg. the **Miller's description** (hairlike those on a sow's ear) and the squire ("as fresh as is the month of May") and **Franklyn** ("whose beard was white as is a daisy'-).

5. For purposes of comparison and contrast Chaucer at times groups his characters together by profession or mentality into **"character clusters"** eg. the **military group** (knight, squire, yeoman who belong to the same profession but to different classes, and have different mentalities and attitudes—the sober knight, the gay squire, the loyal yeoman); the **ecclesiastical group** eg. **Summoner and Pardoner** (partners in crime and villainy): the **Farmyard group** (Miller, Reeve).

Chaucer's art of characterization then shows a fine, creative realism and sharp psychological insight. Following the proper medieval tradition he begins the description and analysis of his characters from t-he head (top) and concludes at the toe. While following the medieval technique he also blends remarkable modern approaches to character—thus his cliaracterization is a blend of the medieval and the modern.

Note : It has been suggested by some scholars that Chaucer based some of his characters on real-life figures eg. the person is supposed to have been based on the English Reformer

Wycliff. Whether true or not Chaucet's characters are remarkably life-like and real.

1.5.4 Chaucer's Humour: In the Prologue

Humour as a literary element was notably absent in the Middle Ages. Life was so difficult and religious passions so straitened man's outlook that few had the time or the inclination to laugh. Chaucer's contemporary **Langland** is a case in point. The reformative zeal in Pier's Plowman led to satires which is also humour, but of a different kind. In **Pier's Plowman** all is sternness and dedication, moral earnestness and ascetioism. Langland's inspiration flows from moral righteousness and reformistic zeal. Chaucer had no such moral reformism in mind when he wrote the Canterbury Tales. He does not wish to change men and women, life and manners and morals—rather he presents men as-they-are, not men as-they-should/ought-to/-be. Chaucer's outstanding qualities are a cosmopolitan benevolence and an indulgent tolerance (for fallen man)—he is **England's first great humorist** in a most serious and stern age.

1. There are two aspects to Chaucer's Humour : an elegant, polished, urbane, Frenchified sophisticated wit and an Elizabethan or Shakespearian breadth, vigour and zest for life, in the prologue there are emamples of .both—the polished, tongue-in-cheek mocking of the elegant Prioress who spoke the French, not of Paris, but of the remote English village of Strittbrd-at-Bowe is a contrast to the'almost vulgar, broad, semi-farcical account of the Miller (who had a nose on which was a wart, on which grew a tuft of hairs red as the bristles in a pig's ears) and the corrupt Summoner and Pardoner.

2. Character is the vehicle of Chaucer's Humour. Chaucer's Humour is expressed through the medium of character and personality rather than through the narration or description of incidents and events (at least in the Prologue). Here, Chaucer's humour arises from his characters failing to practice what they preach i.e. from the incongruity (or gap) between the public mask and the private face of his pilgrims eg.

(a) The **Church characters** who lead corrupt and dissolute lives in reality but present a dedicated public mask eg. Monk, Friar, Summoner and Pardoner (who make fools out of simple village-folk-by selling them "pigs' bones" as relics) et al.

(b) The **Sergeant-at-law** who appears more busy than he actually is; a dedicated **Doctor** who is actually money-hungry and makes profit out of the plague; the **Shipman,** who is a thief and a pirate but appears to be a patriotic Seaman; the rich flashy **Merchant** who is actually in debt.

3. Chaucer uses the techniques of oblique Satire and irony, puns, inversions, anticlimax in the Prologue. He seldom directly attacks anyone but mildly rebukes, gently reveals and exposes the follies of men and their manners.

Irony is more indirect and more tolerant and present in the expose of the Prioress and

her courtly habits, in the portrayal of the Monk, the Squire, the Merchant, the Doctor. Puns and condensed couplets produce humour in the descriptions of such characters as :

The Doctor **of Physic** : “For Gold in physics is a cordial. Therefore he loved gold in special/’

The Clerk of Oxenford : “Although he was a philosopher. He had but little gold in cofre.”qqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqq

The Shipman : “When that he fought and had the higher hand. By water he sent them home to every land.” ^

The Wyf of Bath : “Of remedies of love she knew per chance/For she koude of that art the olde daunce.”

The Merchant: “For sooth he was a worthy man with-alle, But sooth to slyn. I hoot how men hym calle.”

At the end of the prologue Chaucer turns his humourous glance towards himself and his readers. In a self-mocking, half-serious vein the most learned poet of his times confesses “my wit is short” and apologises to us his readers for his dullness, lack of intelligence and associated limitations. He jokes at his own expense (and ours too) and thus expresses a generous and truly humourous turn of mind.

1.6 ❑ Style

If the **Canterbury Tales** were written today the prologue would be in prose, although some of the Tales require an elevated and ritual style.

The Prologue is written in rhyming petameter—in a simple and colloquial style. Normally it avoids the elevation and use of imagery and allusion which are sometimes poetic, although the opening is elaborate and formal; occasionally we come across similes too. The language is lucid, swift, almost transparent. Chaucer’s expository in the General prologue is recognized as a model of simplicity and elegance: it gives the illusion of a varied stream of discourse, lively, free from pedantry and vulgarity.

If the style is some times off-hand, this is partly because of the intimacy Chaucer establishes with his readers, his popularity and sanity, and partly a rhetorical skill. If art is to conceal art, Chaucer’s art is to profess artlessness. The strength of his art or style lies in its confident ability to do whatever is required of it. The most easily isolated poetic quality of the prologue is the crispness of the rhymes. This is evident in the self-contained couplet:

"She was so charitable and so piteous
She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
Kaught in a trappe....."

Many of the best rhymes are for the purposes of ironic wit: eg. Cloystre/oystre, hoot/goot and bledde/fedde/deep/breed. Each rhyme is a comment—witty and fantastic. It is through the rhymes that we feel the sharpness that plays beneath Chaucer's lofty of homely tone.

1.7 ❑ Text of Proiogue : Lines 1-207

[An Interlinear Translation]

1. Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
   When April with its sweet-smelling showers
2. The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
   Has pierced the drought of March to the root,
3. And bathed every veyne in swich licour
   And bathed every vein of the plants) in such liquid
4. Of which vetru engendred is the flour.
   By the power of which the flower is created;
5. Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
   When the West Wind also with its sweet breath,
6. Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
   In every wood and field has breathed life into,
7. The tendre croppes. and the yonge sonne
   The tender new leaves, and the young sun
8. Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne.
   Has run half its course in Aries.
9. And smale foweles maken melodye.
   And small fowls make melody.
10. Thai slepen ai thenyght with open ye
    Those thai sleep all the night with open eyes
11. (Sepnketh them Nature in hir corages).
    (So Narnre incites thein.in their hearts;..
12. Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.
    Then Talk long to go on pilgrimages.
13. And paimeres for 10 seken s.iraunge strondes.
    And professional pilgrims (long) to seek foreign shores,
14. To feme halwes, kowlhe in sondry londes;
    To (go to) distant shrines, known in various lands :

15. And specially from every shires ende
    And specially from every shire's end
16. Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
    Of England to Canterbury they travel,
17. The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
    To seek the holy blessed martyr,
18. That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
    Who helped them when they were sick.
19. Bifil that in that seson on a day.
    It happened that in that season on a day.
20. In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay
    In Southwerk at the Tabard Inn as I lay
21. Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage
    Ready to go on my pilgrimage
22. To Caunterbury with ful devout qorage,
    To Canterbury with a very devout spirit,
23. At nyght was come into that hostelrye
    At night had come into that hostelry
24. Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye
    Well nine and twenty in a company
25. Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
    Of various sorts of people, by chance fallen
26. In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
    In fellowship, and they were all pilgrims,
27. That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.
    Who intended to ride toward Canterbury.
28. Thechambres and the stables weren wyde,
    The bedrooms and the stables were spacious.
29. And wel we were-n esed atte beste.
    And we were well accommodated in the best way.
30. And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
    And in brief, when the sun was (gone) to rest,
31. So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
    I had so spoken with everyone of them
32. That I Was of hir felaweshipe anon.
    That I was of their fellowship straightway,
33. And made forward erly for to ryse,
    And made agreement to rise early,
34. To take oure wey ther as I yow devyse.
    To take our way where I (will) tell you.

35. But nathelees, whil I have tyrhe and space,
    But nonetheless, while 1 have time and opportunity,
36. Er that I ferther in this tale pace.
    Before I proceed further in this tale,
37. Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
    It seems to me in accord with reason
38. To telle yow al the condicioun
    To tell you all the circumstances
39. Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
    Of each of them, as it seemed to me.
40. And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
    And who they were, and of wnat social rank,
41. And eek in what array that they were inne,
    And also what clothing that they were in;
42. And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne.
    And at a knight then will 1 first begin.
43. A KNIGHT ther was, and that a worthy man,
    A KNIGHT there was, and that (one was) a worthy man,
44. That fro the tyme that he first uigan
    Who from the time that he first began
45. To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
    To ride out, he loved chivalry^
46. Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.
    Fidelity and good reputation, generosity and courtesy.
47. Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,
    He was very worthy in his lord's war,
48. And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,
    And for that he had ridden, no man farther,
49. As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,
    As well in Christendom as in heathen lands,
50. And evere honoured for his worthynesse;
    And (was) ever honored for his worthiness;
51. At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.
    He was at Alexandria when it was won.
52. Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne
    He had sat very many times in the place of honor,
53. Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
    Above (knights of) all nations in Prussia;
54. In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
    He had campaigned in Lithuania and in Russia,

55. No Cristen man so ofte of his degree
No Christian man of his rank so often (had done so).
56. In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
Also he had been in Grenada at the siege
57. Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye.
Of Algeciras; and had ridden in Morocco.
58. At Lyeys was he and at Satalye,
He was at Ay ash and at Atalia,
59. Whan they were wonne, and in the Crete See
When they were won, and in the Mediterranean
60. At many a noble armee hadde he be.
He had been at many a noble expedition.
61. At mortal batailles hadde he been fiiiene,
He had been at fifteen mortal battles,
62. And foughten for oure feith at Tramyssene
And fought for our faith at Tlemcen
63. In lysles thries, and ay slayn his too.
Three times in formal duels, and each time slain his foe.
64. This like worthy knyght hadde been also
This same worthy knight had also been
65. Somtyme with the lord of Palatye
At one time with the lord of Balat
66. Agayn another hethen in Turkye;
Against another heathen in Turkey;
67. And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys.
And evermore he had an outstanding reputation
68. And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
And although he was brave, he was prudent,
69. And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
And of his deportment as meek as is a maid.
70. He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
He never yet said any rude word
71. In al his lyf unto no maner wight,
In all his life unto any sort of person.
72. He was a verray, parfit.gentil knyght.
He was a truly perfect, noble knight.
73. But for to tellen yow of his array,
But to tell you of his clothing,
74. His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.
His horses were good, but he was not gaily dressed.

75. Of fustian he wered a gypon
He wore a tunic of coarse cloth
76. Al bismotered with his habergeon,
All stained (with rust) by his coat of mail,
77. For he was late ycome from his viage,
For he was recently come (back) from his expedition.
78. And wente for to doon his pilgrymage.
And went to do his pilgrimage.
79. With hym ther was his sone, a young SQUIER,
With him there was his son, a young SQUIRE,
80. A lovyere and a lusty bacheler,
A lover and a lively bachelor,
81. With lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse.
With locks curled as if they had been laid in a curler.
82. Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gesse.
He was twenty years of age, I guess.
83. Of his stature he was of evene lengthe,
Of his stature he was 01 rhoderate height,
84. And wonderly dely vere, and of greet strengthe.
And wonderfully agile, and of great strength.
85. And he hadde been somtyme in chyvachie
And he had been for a time on a cavalry expedition
86. In Flaundres, in Artoys, and Pycardie,
In Flanders, in Artois, and Picardy,
87. And born hym weel, as of so litel space,
And conducted himself well, for so little a space of time.
88. In hope to stonden in his lady grace,
In hope to stand in his lady's good graces.
89. Embrouded was he, as it were a meede
He was embroidered, as if it were a mead
90. Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and reede.
All full of fresh flowers, white and red.
91. Syngynge he was, or floytynge, al the day;
Singing he was, or fluting, all the day;
92. He was as fresh as is the month of May.
He was as fresh as is the mon'h of May.
93. Short was his growne, with sieves longe and wyde.
His gown was short, with long and wide sleeves.
94: Wel koude he sitte on hors and faire ryde.
He well knew how to sit on horse and handsomely ride.

95. He koude songes make and wel endite,
    He knew how to make songs and well compose (the words),
96. Juste and eek daunce, and weel purtreye and write.
    Joust and also dance, and well draw and write.
97. So hoote he lovede that by nyghtertale
    He loved so passionately that at nighttime
98. He sleep namoore than dooth a nyghtyngale.
    He slept no more than does a nightingale.
99. Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable,
    Courteous he was, humble, and willing to serve,
100. And carf biform his fader at the table.
    And (he) carved before his father at the table.
101. A YEMAN hadde he and servantz namo
    He (the Knight) had A YEOMAN and no more servants
102. At that tyme, for hym liste ride so.
    At that time, for it pleased him to ride so,
103. And he was clad in cote and hood of grene.
    And he (the yeoman) was *cla*^ in coat and hood of green.
104. A sheef of pecok arwes, bright and kene,
    A sheaf of peacock arrows, bright and keen,
105. Under his belt he bar ful thriftily
    He carried under his belt very properly
106. (Wel koude he dresse his takel yemanly;
    (He well knew how to care for his equipment as a yeoman should;
107. His arwes drouped noght with fetheres lowe),
    drooping feathers).
108. And in his hand he baar a myghty bowe.
    And in his hand he carried a mighty bow.
109. A not heed hadde he, with a broun visage.
    He had a close-cropped head, with a brown face,
110. Of wodecraft wel koude he al the usage.
    He well knew all the practice of woodcraft.
111. Upon his arm he baar a gay bracer,
    He wore an elegant archer's arm-guard upon his arm.
112. And by his syde a swerd and a bokeler.
    And by his side a sword and a small shield,
113. And on that oother syde a gay daggere
    And on that other side an elegant dagger
114. Harneised wel and sharp as point of spere;
    Well ornamented and sharp as the point of a spear;

115. A Cristopher on his brest of silver sheene.
A Christopher-medal of bright silver (was) on his breast.
116. An horn he bar. the bawdryk was of grene;
He carried a horn, the shoulder strap was green:
117. A forster was he, soothly, as I gesse.
He was a forester, truly, as I guess.
118. Ther was also a Nonne, a PRIORESSE,
There was also a Nun, a PRIORESS,
119. That of hir smylyng was ful symple and coy;
Who was very simple and modest in her smiling;
120. Hire gretteste ooth was but by Seim Loy;
Her greatest oath was but by Saint Loy;
121. And she was cleped madame Eglentyne.
And she was called Madam Eglantine.
122. Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne.
She sang the divine, service very well,
123. Entuned in hir nose ful semely;
Intoned in her nose in a very polite manner;
124. And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
And she spoke French very well and elegantly,
125. After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
In the manner of Stratford at the Bow,
126. For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.
For French of Paris was to her unknown.
127. At mete wel ytaught was she with alle;
At meals she was well taught indeed;
128. She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
She let no morsel fall from her lips,
129. Ne wette his fyngres in hir sauce depe;
Nor wet her fingers deep in her sauce;
130. Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
She well knew how to carry a morsel (to her mouth) and take good care
131. That no drope ne fille upon hire brest.
That no drop fell upon her breast.
132. In curteisie was set ful muchel hir lest.
Her greatest pleasure was in good manners.
133. Hir over-lippe wyped she so clene
She wiped her upper lip so clean
134. That in hir coppe ther was no ferthyng sene
That in her cup there was seen no tiny bit

135. Of grece, whan she dronken hadde hir draughte.
Of grease, when she had drunk her drink.
136. Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.
She reached for her food in a very seemly manner.
137. And sikerly she was of greet desport,
And surely she was of excellent deportment,
138. And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port.
And very pleasant, and amiable in demeanor.
139. And peyned hire to countrefete cheere
And she took pains to ir ;tate the manners
140. Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
Of court, and to be dignified in behavior,
141. And to ben holdeh digne of reverence.
And to be considered worthy of reverence.
142. But for to speken of hire conscience,
But to speak of her moral sense,
143. She was so charitable and so pitous
She was so charitable and so compassionate
144. She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous
She woul'd weep, if she saw a mouse
145. Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.
Caught in a trap, if it were dead or bled.
146. Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde
She had some small hounds that she fed
147. With rosted flessh. or milk and wastel-breed.
With roasted meat, or milk and fine white bread.
148. But soore wepte she if oon of hem were deed.
But sorely she wept if one of them were dead,
149. Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;
Or if someone smote it smartly with a stick;
150. And al was conscience and tendre herte.
And all was feeling and tender heart.
151. Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was,
Her wimple was pleated in a very seemly manner,
152. Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,
Her nose (was) well formed, her eyes gray as glass,
153. Hir mouth ful smal, and therto softe and reed.
Her mouth very small, and moreover soft and red.
154. But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
But surely she had a fair, forehead;

155. It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;
It was almost nine inches broad, I believe;
156. For, hardily, she was nat undergrowe.
For, certainly, she was not undergrown.
157. Ful fetys was hir cloke, as I was war.
Her cloak was very well made, as I was aware.
158. Of smal coral aboute hire arm she bar
About her arm she wore of small coral
159. A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene.
A set of beads, with large green beads (to mark divisions).
160. And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene.
And thereon hung a brooch of very bright gold,
161. On which ther was. first write a crowned A,
On which there was first written an A with a crown,
162. And after Amor vincit omnia.
And after "Love conquers all."
163. Another NONNE with hire hadde she,
She had another NUN with her.
164. That was hir chapeleyne, and preestes thre.
Who was her secretary, and three priests.
165. A MONK ther was, a fair for the maistrie,
There was a MONK, an extremely fine one,
166. An outridere, that lovede venerie,
An outrider (a monk with business outside the monastery),
who loved hunting,
167. A manly man, to been an abbot able.
A virile man. qualified to be an abbot.
168. Ful many a deyntee hors hadde he in stable.
He had very many fine horses in his stable,
169. And whan he rood, men myghte his brydel heere
And when he rode, one could hear his bridle
170. Gynglen in a whistlynge wynd als cleere
Jingle in a whistling wind as clear
171. And eek as loude as dooth the chapel belle
And also as loud as do^s the chapel belle
172. Ther as this lord was kepere ot the celle.
Where this lord was in charge of the cell (subordinate monastery).
173. The reule of Seint Maure or of Seint Beneit—
The rule of Saint Maurus or of Saint Benedict—

174. By cause that it was old and somdel streit
Because it was old and somewhat strict
175. This like Monk leet olde thynges pace,
This same Monk let old things pass away,
176. And heeld after the newe world the space.
And followed the broader customs of modern times.
177. He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
He gave not a plucked hen for that text
178. That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
That says that hunters are not holy men,
179. Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees,
Nor that a monk, when he is heedless of rules,
180. Is likned til a fissh that is waterlees—
Is like a fish that is out of water—
181. This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre.
This is to say, a monk out of'his cloister.
182. But thilke text heeld he nat worth an oystre;
But he considered that same text not worth an-oyster;
183. And I seyde his opinion was good.
And I said his opinion was good.
184. What sholde he studie and make hymselven wood,
Why should he study and make himself crazy.
185. Upon a book in cloystre alwey to poure,
Always to pore upon a book in the cloister,
186. Or swynken with his handes, and laboure,
Or work with his hands, and labor,
187. As Austyn bit ? How shal/he world be served ?
As Augustine commands ? How shall the world be served ?
188. Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved !
Let Augustine have his work reserved to him !
189. Therfore he was a prikasour aright;
Therefore he was indeed a vigorous horseman;
190. Grehoundes he hadde as swift as fowel in flight;
He had greyhounds as swift as fowl in flight;
191. Of prikyng and of huntyng for the hare
Of tracking and of hunting for the hare
192. Was al his lust, for no cost wolde he spare.
Was all his pleasure, by no means would be refrain from it.
193. I seigh his sieves purfiled at the hond
I saw his sleeves lined at the hand

194. With grys, and that the fyneste,of a lond;
With squirrel fur, and that the finest in the land;
195. And for to festne his hood under his chyn.
And to fasten his hood under his chin,
196. He hadde of gold ywroght a ful curious pyn;
He had a very skillfully made pin of gold;
197. A love-knotte in the gretter ende ther was.
There was an elaborate knot in the larger end.
198. His heed was balled, that shoon as any glas,
His head was bald, which shone like any glass,
199. And eek his face, as he hadde been enoynt.
And his face did too, as if he had been rubbed with oil.
200. He was a lord ful fat and in good poynt;
He was a very fat lord and in good condition;
201. His eyen stepe, and rollynge in his heed,
His eyes were prominent, and rolling in his head,
202. That stemed as a forneys of .a leed;
Which (the eyes) gleamed like a furnace under a cauldron;
203. His bootes souple. his hors in greet estaat.
His boots (were) supple, his horse in excellent condition.
204. Now certeinly he was a fair prelaat;
Now certainly he was a handsome ecclesiastical dignitary;
205. He was nat pale as a forpyned goost,
He was not pale as a tormented spirit.
206. A fat swan loved he best of any roost.
A fat swan loved he best of any roast.
207. His palfrey was as broun as is a berye.
His palfrey (saddle horse) was as brown as is a berry.

1.8 ❑ Questions

Questions and Topics :

(a) Consider Chaucer's Prologue as a social document from which we learn of the men, manners and morals of 14th century society.

(b) "Chaucer's art of characterization is both medieval and modern".—Discuss.

(c) What are the themes and ideas presented in the opening 18 lines of the Prologue?

(d) "Chaucer is the one great humorist of the Medieval Age. Discuss with reference to Chaucer's use of irony, satire, puns and other humorous devices.

NB : For short questions couplets and other portions of the text of the °rologue quoted in this unit may be extracted and students may be asked to match the lines to the character.

1.9 ❑ Select Bibliography (References)

1. Text of the Prologue Edited by A. W. Pollard; R. T. Davies; F. N. Robinson.
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