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# **BRITISH POETRY AND DRAMA – 14TH TO 17TH CENTURY**

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**Ans. Context:** These lines come from John Donne's poem *The Sun Rising*.

**Explanation:** It exalts the speaker's love as surpassing worldly power, wealth, and honour. He boldly declares that he embodies states and princes, asserting that these rulers are mere imitations of his significance. Their grandeur pales compared to the depth and reality of his love. Donne uses "mimic" to demean honour as a mere pretence and compares wealth to alchemy-deceptive and illusory. Through these lines, Donne critiques material and political pursuits, portraying them as insignificant next to the profound truth and fulfilment found in love. The speaker's hyperbolic claims highlight the boundless, almost divine nature of his relationship, positioning it as the true measure of value and existence.

(e) Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and  
desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness  
dwell,  
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as  
well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st  
thou then?

**Ans. Context:** These lines are taken from John Donne's *Holy Sonnet*.

**Explanation:** The poet confronts Death directly, diminishing its power and pride. The speaker declares that Death is not a mighty force but a mere "slave" to external factors like fate, chance, rulers, and the actions of desperate men. Death's supposed power is further trivialized as it is associated with destructive tools like poison, war, and sickness. Moreover, the speaker asserts that substances like opium ("poppy") or magical charms can induce peaceful sleep more effectively than Death's "stroke." By rhetorically asking why Death "swell'st" with pride, Donne portrays it as undeserving of fear or reverence. These lines assert a triumph of faith over mortality, celebrating the eternal life promised by divine salvation.

### Section-B

**Q. 2. Write short notes on the following:**

(a) Elizabethan Theatre

**Ans.** Elizabethan theatre was a significant cultural movement that integrated classical drama's elements, blending Greek tragedy and comedy with a distinct English flair. Inspired by Seneca's Latin plays, it adopted features like soliloquies, revenge motifs, the

supernatural, and the role of chance or fate, appealing strongly to Elizabethan audiences. Drawing from Roman models by Ovid, Plutarch, and Seneca, the theatre evolved with a Renaissance focus on the individual, exploring personal dilemmas, societal relationships, and public morality. This period's dramas emphasized human potential, highlighting man's ambivalent relationship with nature and inherent forces, challenging traditional morality and redefining good and evil. Christopher Marlowe's works, reflecting these trends, epitomized the period's exploration of human ambition and complexities.

(b) The implications of Lady Macbeth's sleep walking

**Ans. Ref.:** See Chapter-15, Page No. 144, Q. No. 3.

(c) The structure of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*

**Ans. Ref.:** See Chapter-2, Page No. 15, 'The Structure'.

(d) Tudor Poetry

**Ans. Ref.:** See Chapter-3, Page No. 26, 'Tudor Poetry'.

(e) The concept of love in Shakespearean sonnets

**Ans.** The concept of love in Shakespearean sonnets is multifaceted, exploring themes of passion, beauty, time, and eternity. Shakespeare often juxtaposes the idealized and the realistic, portraying love as both transcendent and deeply human.

In sonnets like 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"), love is immortalized through poetry, transcending the ravages of time and decay. Here, love becomes eternal, preserved in "eternal lines to time." Conversely, sonnets like 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun") reject traditional poetic hyperbole, embracing an honest, imperfect, and human love that values authenticity over idealization.

Shakespeare also explores love's vulnerability, as seen in 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds"), where he defines love as steadfast and unyielding, enduring hardships and remaining constant despite external changes. Yet, he acknowledges love's complexities, intertwining it with themes of jealousy, betrayal, and mortality, particularly in sonnets addressing the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady.

In his sonnets, love is both a source of joy and suffering, transcending the physical to touch the spiritual and intellectual. Through his nuanced portrayals, Shakespeare captures love's enduring

# Sample Preview of The Chapter

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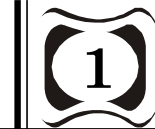
# BRITISH POETRY AND DRAMA - 14th-17th CENTURY

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## BLOCK-I : CHAUCER AND SPENSER

### Chaucer: Life and Works

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Geoffrey Chaucer is called the father of English literature. Inspired by his multi-layered society, he started writing in English. His works show his linguistic skills, musicality, deeper awareness of human character and literary subtleties. His writings reflect the life at court, diplomacy entailing regular visits to other countries and manners and morals of the people. His works show his skills in dramatization, lyric, metaphor-rich description and character portrayal. He was a social critic too. In this chapter, we shall get a view of Chaucer and know the time the poet was born, the circumstances that characterized the ethos of early medieval England and his important literary works.

#### **CHAPTER AT A GLANCE**

##### **CHAUCER'S LIFE AND THE RICH BACKDROP OF LIFE'S REALITIES**

Sometime between 1340 and 1345, Chaucer was born in London in the age of Edward Third. His family was quite close to the court of the King and was familiar with the ways and manners of the upper stratum. In the starting of his career, he served the king as his valet, a high office in the royal palace. In 1370, he participated in diplomatic negotiations with the French and Italian kings. On return from the important missions as a representative of the English royalty, in 1374 he was appointed Controller of Customs and Subsidy of Wools, Skins, and Hides at the port of London. He was honoured with the title of "Knight of the Shire of Kent" in 1386. In the last decade of the 14th century, he fell from favour of the high circle and faced difficult days and died in 1400. Chaucer lived in the age of chivalry, which means as I.G. Handyside says he bore distinctions of "the magnificent court of Edward Third with knights

and ladies, heraldry and tournaments, minstrels and poetry, music and story-telling". The age in which Chaucer lived could not hold the courtly life *per se* as a constant because it needed a system of production and distribution of necessities as well as wealth. The peasant, the ploughman, the owner of farmlands, merchant, tradesman and a host of petty official played a crucial role in the age. Chaucer captured the surrounding scene and set a high benchmark with his works.

##### **CHAUCER: MAIN LITERARY WORKS**

His courtly life and exposure to cultures in other countries helped Chaucer to write effectively with certain finesse. The life he had led also provided him felicity in French and Italian and he composed poems in both these languages. Since he was close to the life of the court, he represented the voice of urbanity that helped him get rid of the roughness and crudity characteristic of ordinary life in the countryside and the small towns. In the final phase of his creativity, he devoted entirely to English for literary expression. The final phase roughly started in the mid-eighties and continued till his death. *The Canterbury Tales* was his most mature work and earned him lasting fame. He started writing this in 1386 and kept and continued with it in the nineties. His other important works include: *The Parliament of Fowls* (1375), *Troilus And Criseyde* (1382-5) and *The Legend of Good Women* (1386). He also translated version of *Roman de la Rose* under the title *Romaunt of the Rose*. This is considered as the main source of all that Chaucer wrote. The poem had the dominant features of French romances written in the 12th and 13th centuries. Chaucer picked up or coined words of his own to suit the French expressions. The translation became a ground for him to evolve a style that came as near the English reader as possible;

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he saw the governing principle of allegory in French literature of the period. The narrative of the French source worked at two levels – one that saw nature, for instance, initially at the level of reality and the other at the level of what was understood as ‘Personification.’ This literary method like describing the spring in its glory as a season and personification of cold weather, a river, or a mountain was successfully emulated by Chaucer. Chaucer borrowed from the French and to some extent the Italian tradition and enriched his vocabulary as well as the writing skills.

*Roman de la Rose* was only a source and likewise the English translation of it were essentially the starting points of expression, not necessitating close adherence to the original text as became the convention in the later translation attempt. He experimented greatly while composing his *Romaunt of the Rose* because of which it got an English character. The translation of *Roman de la Rose* in English enabled Chaucer to give a new humanist orientation to his writing. The original work satirized the Christian clerical practice of holiness and presented human emotions in the raw. There was a great deal of earthiness and crudity in the attitude of the writer of the French text. He was using fabliau to indulge in the carnal desire and entertain through it the audience tired of religious preaching. To this end, the writer would take to coarse expression and evoke the natural expressions of people in the countryside. For Chaucer, the same text became a source of evolving what may be called materiality of human behaviour. The fables, too, came to be tempered for purpose of cultural uplift. The use of tales from the folklore and their imaginative interpretation to suit conditions in the 14th century played the big role of making Chaucer what he has been known for in English literature – the genius who laid the foundation of modernity and secular outlook in writing. Thus, coarseness and crudity of attitude in the French literary accounts of the day were modified by Chaucer into a visionary presentation of the highest order.

*Troilus and Criseyde* is another Chaucer’s work that comes close in literary value and appeal to *The Canterbury Tales*. It has a strong narrative that pulls it in the direction of what much later came to be called a fictional work, a novel. Broadly looking like a poem, it also uses short and crisp dialogues as well as a set of well-crafted characters. In length, it is like an epic, but its thematic concerns being limited, it may fit into the category of a romance.

The happenings and events in it have a sense of immediacy and urgency even as the undertone is that of tragedy. It has the pattern of a novel. Its unique placing in the list of Chaucer’s works tells us about the depth of the author’s imagination. *Troilus and Criseyde*, written in rhymed verse and a taut structure, displays the control and discipline that Chaucer had while giving shape to the vicissitudes that visited the two lovers, taken from Homer.

**PLACING CHAUCER IN THE BROAD LITERARY TRADITION OF EUROPE**

Chaucer’s writings feature the humanist outlook and the medieval thought and include ideas and principles rooted in tradition and myths. They provide an alternative view of human life closer to the past practices. He wrote about the people of his time immersed in old beliefs. He understood their compulsions but also spotted specific distortions in their behaviour. He took note how people observed rituals on one side and felt tempted to break the shackles of morality on the other. Chaucer would criticize them for their duplicity and show them the supposedly right path, but preferred not to do that and went in the other direction of grasping the reality of their experience with open eyes. In the second half of the 14th century when Chaucer lived, a gap could be seen between the religious and secular aspects. The former swore by the fixed norms of virtuous living and the latter took inspiration from the emerging ethos of life’s necessities. The former sought guidance from the book and the latter from urges of the body. It can be said as the cleavage between the soul and the mind. Relevant here is what Chris Harman says – writers such as Boccaccio, Chaucer, and, above all, Dante made a name for themselves by producing a secular literature written in their local idiom – and, in the process, gave it the prestige to begin its transition into a ‘national’ language.

In the society Chaucer lived the lords grew ever more remote from the practicalities of producing the wealth they consumed. The warriors descendants in rough fortresses resided in elaborate castles, cloaked themselves in silk and engaged in expensive courtly and knightly rituals that asserted their superiority over other social groups. They regarded themselves as a class apart from everybody else, with hereditary legal rights sanctioned by sacred religious ceremonies. Within this caste, an elaborate gradation of ranks separated the great aristocrats from the ordinary knights who were legally dependant on them. But all its layers were

increasingly disdainful of anyone involved in actually creating wealth – whether wealthy merchants, humble artisans or impoverished peasants. Writers were judged by their appeal. They also bring in questions of perception that may ruffle feathers of a few and inspire others to pick up hints and look at the world differently. In such a context, each of the three writers – Boccaccio, Chaucer and Dante – made a dent in his respective culture and introduced a new trend.

#### **CHAUCER'S HUMANISM AND SECULAR OUTLOOK**

In the 14th century, people from the lower classes and groups to the higher ones accorded primacy to God and the institutions associated with the established faith. The idea of God and the existing institutions were promoted. Negation of individuality was an important norm of the period. Everyone had a name, but things did not go much beyond it. The person bearing name looked for guidance towards the church, or towards the work s/he had to perform in life. Thus, people like artisan, prioress, merchant and knight followed an unwritten but long established code of their professions. Members had started relating their acts to the day-to-day needs and practices that differed in each case. Comparison of one's own act with that of another in the same category was a practice that happened more frequently than before. Church officials read the religious book in entirely separate manners. Chaucer's depict these people and the atmosphere in which they operate in clear terms. Others also noticed the emergence of an alternative way of looking at the things around.

The language of literature is the language of life, but it was not the same for Chaucer since he used the vocabulary that was the means of communication at the street level. The local idiom was the core of the writing of his mature phase that belonged to the last decades of the fourteenth century. In the early period, Chaucer wrote in French and Italian. However, in the two languages, his eye would invariably remain stuck to the writers who had inspired him to take to the pen. There was a kind of standard he was supposed to follow, not a happy idea for one whose emotional content would draw him again and again to his surroundings. Yet, the problem with the current idiom nearer home was that it did not bear the weight of larger acceptance.

Chaucer had the capability to dramatize, to play with words, to draw a pen-portrait, and he could produce humour through the tone inherent in the idiom. By training, Chaucer was a person of courtly manners

and had served the King as a diplomat of merit. He was widely travelled, too. Having been in contact with a whole variety of people, he was conversant with the habits of the privileged where subtlety and sophistication were in constant need. His quality of understanding men and morals being so high, he had a good ear for meaningful phrases as well as suggestive hints. For this reason, perhaps, he felt attracted to the common usage of words in his close surroundings.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, he delved deep into the nuances of speech as well as observe simplicity, devotion, hypocrisy, cunningness, courage and assertiveness he marked the behaviour of the English people. The venture of writing poetry in the local idiom enlarged his vocabulary no end. It connected him with concepts and ideas of the various regions from where those people came who held his attention and whom he would represent in his poetry. The variety of individuals who peopled his literary landscape helped him broaden his imaginative world that ran parallel to the one that surrounded him.

#### **INTER-TWINING OF SOCIETY AND LITERATURE**

The Black Death and the labour shortages that followed it served to aggravate the long-standing social tensions between those who profited from the land and those who actually worked it. In the revision of his Latin poem *Vox Clamantis* Gower introduced an allegorical description of wild peasant rabble rampaging through the land in the guise of beasts. It was a pointed and antipathetic reference to the traumatic Peasant's Revolt of the summer of 1381. It was the most concerted and disruptive popular revolt in English medieval history. The imposition of a vastly unpopular poll-tax on the labouring classes may have been the immediate provocation for the revolt, but the leaders identify misgovernment and exploitation as its deeper causes. In the late 14th century, the Church was deeply affected by the unstable nature of society and its beliefs. The Black Death caused the parish clergy to suffer from a decline not only in numbers but also in quality. In Langland's poetry, the more worrying inadequacy of the parish clergy proved a recurrent theme. The worldliness of monks, friars and religious hangers-on was a subject of Chaucer's satire. Few educated English men and women expressed doubts on the basic truths of Christianity as they were defined by the Church, but many more were ready to question the standing, authority and behaviour of the Church's ordained representatives. In the hands of clergy, Christianity was

ritualistic in nature. There were “Hangerson” in large numbers in and around the churches. These did not care much for the miseries of the common people who were groaning under the weight of natural calamities. Instead of identifying with the suffering people, the clergymen and their associates went about their worldly pursuits cynically. If Chaucer satirized the monks and friars of the day, he did so to highlight the gap between their word and deed. His poetry moved closer to a direct comment on society than a description that would afford imaginative pleasure linked with watching nature in its various hues. It would be more appropriate thus to term Chaucer a social historian who brought to life the real conditions in England’s rural and urban scene. Reference is also made in the quote to the likely reason behind the fall of standards in clergymen’s behaviour. The famine of the 1340s that caused havoc to the social fabric in England, particularly in the countryside is the case in point.

The famine “Thinned” the number of the clergy and compelled them to adopt the cruel and insensitive worldly ways. It appears that the strategy for survival sickeningly combined with evil tricks that the underprivileged might have taken recourse to at the time. The evil intention to take advantage of the faith of the pious raised its head in terms of religious and moral preaching. The speeches and paraphrased views of the various characters in *The Canterbury Tales* show this. The famous Chaucerian irony emerging from his descriptions, uses time and again, a hint of the phrases and expressions, that men associated with the church used in their exchanges. Thus, what was a source of entertainment and pleasure in Chaucer’s time became a subject of social interest in the succeeding centuries. Each manner, gesture and phrase that Chaucer puts forth to sketch his characters tells an entirely new and realistic picture to the readers coming to him in the later periods, be it Elizabethan, Augustan, or Modern.

#### **CHARACTERISTICS OF CHAUCER’S ART AND VISION**

John Dryden calls Chaucer a man of most wonderful comprehensive nature because his *Canterbury Tales* depicts the various manners and humours of the entire English nation in his age. He says not a single character has escaped him. All his pilgrims are different from each other not only in their inclinations but also in their very physiognomies and persons. Chaucer’s description gives more than their individual specificities such as physical attributes and their peculiarities. The pilgrims might be from the same

social group, yet they hold dissimilarities that define them as individuals. Dryden also notes that the matter and manner of the characters’ tales are suited to their educations, humours and callings and each of them would be improper in any other mouth. The grave and serious characters are different by their several sorts of their gravity. Even the ribaldry of the low characters is different.

#### **A VIEW OF THE WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE**

*The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* follows the pattern of a link between one tale and another within the overall structure of *The Canterbury Tales*. It means it is the beginning of a new chapter in the account. The nature of the account here is dramatic with characters having specific roles assigned by the writer. *The Wife of Bath* is a character with a presence that catches our attention. The description has her physical appearance, her mental make-up, her social status, her way of conversing with others are clearly chalked out in the description. Chaucer presents her as an open-minded and confident person. Question may be raised we wonder whether women at that time enjoyed the kind of freedom the Wife of Bath exhibits through her behaviour. *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* gives a break from the tales and opens a window to the world that surrounds conditions in the tales. Its informality and at the same time the serious role it might play in the movement of the text’s account are beautifully interwoven. It gives an occasion to the travellers for feeling at ease with themselves and take attention away from the mission they are jointly pursuing and it is because of the informality. At the level of the form, the prologue frees the narrative from constraints of the teller (the poet Chaucer) and the host (the inn-keeper). The shackles of art, the norms and principles of the aesthetic are taken away and suddenly we find ourselves standing in the market place where any sundry voice can catch our attention. The prologue is supposed to be short and might thus lead us smoothly to the tale. In the *Prologue*, the convention is flouted. Once the wife of bath starts speaking, she goes on and on with one reference woven with another seamlessly. Instead of a link between two tales that the last and the present traveller would tell, this prologue assumes independence as an episode, a happening with a beginning, a middle and an end. This takes the reader into the world of the travellers who belong to the 14th century. Chaucer follows the specific logic of a historian face-to-face with a phenomenon and the life pattern of the people he is talking about. Chaucer notes the mannerism of the travellers, their moods, opinions,