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KRISHNA KANTA HANDIQUI STATE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Patgaon, Rani Gate, Guwahati-781017

SEMESTER 1

MA IN ENGLISH

COURSE 2: ENGLISH POTERY: CHAUCER TO THE NEO CLASSICAL

BLOCK 1: CHAUCER TO SHAKESPEARE

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REFERENCES : For All Units

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William Shakespeare: The Poet, Reading the Sonnets: Major Themes, Shakespeare's Poetic Style, Critical Reception of Shakespeare as a Poet

COURSE INTRODUCTION

This is the second Course of the MA English Programme. This Course introduces you to the realm of English poetry from the time of Geoffrey Chaucer of the 14th century to the Neoclassical poets like John Dryden and Alexander Pope of the 17th and 18th centuries. Chaucer belongs to a period, roughly called Middle English that spans from 1066 to about 1550. The most distinguishing feature of this period is that it is essentially religious. However, this essential character of poetry starts to dissolve during the Renaissance period, which can approximately be dated back to 1500-1660. A new stress on individuality and inwardness becomes an emerging element in the poetry of this period. This is also the time for the flourish and perfection of the English sonnets, the greatest exponent of which is William Shakespeare. Shakespearean sonnets mainly deal with the theme of love and the problems faced by lovers.

The 17th century poets still recognised God as the source of order. Yet, secular elements began to emerge with the Metaphysical poets like John Donne who excelled in his use of witty paradoxes and ingenious ideas. However, towards the end of the century, the focus of poetry becomes almost entirely secular. Explicitly religious poetry is replaced by social poetry best represented by John Dryden and Alexander Pope. T. S. Eliot later aptly observes that Donne made poetry out of a learned but colloquial dialogic speech, Dryden out of the prose of political oratory, and Pope out of the most polished drawing room manner. Another significant seventeenth century poet is John Milton in whose poetry we see influences of the changes taking place during the Civil War of 1642-51 and the aftermath.

Some critics tend to ignore the 18th century poetry on grounds that it is ‘prosaic’. However, we have to use the term ‘prosaic’ as meaning not only ‘like prose’, but as ‘lacking poetic beauty’. Thus, we ought to distinguish between poetry which is like ‘good prose’, and which is like ‘bad prose’. However, John Dryden appeared to cleanse the language of verse and bring it back to the order of prose. For this reason, he has been considered a great poet by none other than T. S. Eliot. Moreover, the tradition of English satire in the hands of Dryden becomes almost the lampoon as he had a special gift for farce, while Pope is more personal than the true satirist. The inclusion of two famous poems by Dryden and Pope in this course serves the purpose of representing the extraordinarily rich neoclassical period of English poetry that gave a proper shape to the English language to be used by the future generation of poets.

For your convenience, this Course is divided into three Blocks. **Block 1** shall deal with Poetry from Chaucer to Shakespeare, **Block 2** shall deal with Metaphysical Poetry to the poetry of Milton, and **Block 3** shall deal with Neoclassical Poetry.

Block I Chaucer to Shakespeare comprises a total of five units, which are as the following:

Unit 1: Introducing Medieval Poetry deals with some important aspects of Medieval poetry. The English language of this period had shaken down to the standard of the East Midland speech, the language of the capital city and of the universities. In the hands of Chaucer, French and English amalgamated to form the Standard English tongue. Gradually, there started emerging a sharper spirit of criticism, a more searching interest in human affairs, and a less complacent acceptance of the established order. By the time of Chaucer, the English poetic style has established itself to inaugurate a new development in poetic writings from England.

Unit 2: Chaucer: The General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* (Part I) deals with life and works of Geoffrey Chaucer, the greatest of the Medieval poets with particular emphasis on his poem *The General Prologue.* The poem *The General Prologue* provides the account of a motley group of pilgrims who represent almost all sections of society, as they happen to meet at the Tabard inn in Southwark and plan to begin their journey to Canterbury under the guidance of the host—Harry Bailly. Thus, this unit introduces the learners to the kind of poetry that Chaucer used to write.

Unit 3: Chaucer's The General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* (Part II), which shall be studied in connection with the previous unit, deals exclusively with Chaucer's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. Against the Hundred Years War was still on and when the social setup of England was almost devastated, the framework of *The Canterbury Tales* was a significant decision on the part of Chaucer to bring the people together.

Unit 4: Thomas Wyatt & Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey:

The Appeal "And wilt thou leave me thus?" (Wyatt) &

"Love that doth reign and live within my thought" (Surrey)

This unit deals with two sonnets written by Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) and Henry Howard. Earl of Surrey (1517-47) who had been the forerunners of the sonnet tradition in English. Wyatt's love poems express the laments of the unrequited or deserted lover, and introduce many of the poetic topics like—sexual love as a hunt, the lover as a ship running aground on the rocks etc. On the other hand, Surrey's love poems look more conventional, stiff and imitative compared with Wyatt's freedom and emotional power. However, Surrey has the enormous historical importance of having introduced blank verse into English.

Unit 5: William Shakespeare:

Sonnet 65 “Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea” &

Sonnet 144 “Two Loves I have of Comfort and Despair”

This is the last unit of this course, and it deals with two sonnets composed by Shakespeare. These sonnets convey a very complex sense of difficulty faced by lovers. The selection of these two sonnets in this unit is made in order to make you learn how Shakespeare conceived ‘the idea of love’, and to help you to examine the art of Shakespeare as a poet of the Elizabethan period.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in “LET US KNOW” along with the text. We have kept “CHECK YOUR PROGRESS” questions in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the “FURTHER READING” list, which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know, the world of literature is too big and so we advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you should read the original texts of the writers as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 1: INTRODUCING MEDIEVAL POETRY

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 Different Forms of Mediaeval Poetry

1.4 Important Medieval Poets and Their Works

1.5 Let us Sum up

1.6 Further Reading

1.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

1.8 Possible Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- identify the important issues related to poetry written in the medieval period
- classify the different forms and aspects of medieval poetry
- make a list of the important medieval poets
- trace some of the important works of medieval poetry

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of the course. In this unit, we shall discuss some important aspects of Medieval poetry, which shall help you to read the next two units of this course. As the old English period was over, the Medieval period set in, the English language has shaken down to the standard of the East Midland speech, the language of the capital city and of the universities. With regard to poetic diction, French and English amalgamated to form the Standard English tongue, which gained its first full expression in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Gradually, there started emerging a sharper spirit of criticism, a more searching interest in human affairs, and a less complacent acceptance of the established order. Although the authorship of many works is not clear, for the first time, Chaucer—a figure of

outstanding literary importance, gives to the age the form and pressure of his genius. You will note that by the time of Chaucer, the English poetic style has established itself, and the main lines of future developments had been laid down. By the end of this unit, we hope that you will be able to discuss medieval poetry in terms of its various aspects.

1.3 DIFFERENT FORMS OF MEDIEVAL POETRY

The Medieval period saw a great and significant advance in poetical forms of literature. However, credit goes to Geoffrey Chaucer who gave Medieval poetry its name. With regard to poetry, we can observe the various forms separating themselves and straightening out into form and coherence, as you will read in the following.

The Lyric:

Lyrics—chiefly religious and love-lyric, continues to be written and developed during this period. Although Chaucer himself contributed very little to it, a number of anonymous bards added to the common stock of lyrics. For example, we can refer to such exquisite pieces as *The Nut-brown Maid,* a hybrid between the lyric and the ballad, and the lovely carols of the Church.

The Ballad:

By the late 14th century, the traditional ballad, exemplified by *Chevy Chace, Sir Patrick Spens* and the Robin Hood poems, had become an important source of popular entertainment, especially in the North. The origins of this form are much disputed. However, whether the ballad was composed by minstrels or was the result of communal activity, it is essentially simple and popular. Mainly about love, local legends, the feats of local heroes, supernatural happenings, or religious stories, the ballad deals with human beings' elemental passions, while its situations are such as affect the individual or family rather than the larger social unit of clan or nation. Its tone is impersonal and detached and the composer's personality is not to be felt. The verse form (most commonly *abcb,* with alternating lines of four and three iambic feet) was subject to considerable variation, but was always simple and easily memorised.

The Rise of the Allegory:

You should note that the rise of allegory too began to affect all branches of poetry in the medieval period. Even at its best, the allegorical method is crude and artificial, but it is a concrete and effective literary device for expounding moral and religious lessons. In this period, we have excellent examples dealing with Courts of Love, Houses of Fame, Dances of the Seven Deadly Sins, and other symbolical subjects. Especially, in the earlier stages of his career, Chaucer himself did not escape the prevailing habit. However, the allegory reached its climax in Herbert Spenser's *The Faerie Queene.*

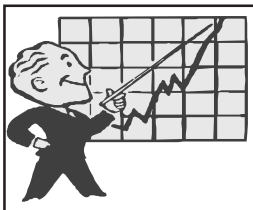
Descriptive and Narrative Poems:

In this form of poetry, *The Canterbury Tales* is the outstanding example. But, in many passages of Langland and Gower too, we have specimens of the same class of poetry. Although there were some weaknesses in the narrative poetry of the day which were partly due to lack of practice, and partly to the reliance upon inferior models, there were some advancements made by Chaucer. Despite the problems of long speeches and irrelevant episodes, the habit of dragging into the story scientific and religious discussions, and an imperfect sense of proportion in the arrangement of the plot, Chaucer presented a powerful grip upon the central interest, a shrewd observation and humour, and quite often a brilliant rapidity of narration.

The Metrical Romance:

A metrical romance is a type of prose poem that deals with themes such as love, rites of passage, chivalry, adventure and interpersonal relationships. Knights, fair maidens and epic journeys appear frequently in a metrical romance. Thus, the metrical romance became the most dominant poetic form among royalty, nobility and wealthy landowners during the medieval period and the Renaissance. The defining feature of a metrical romance is the presence of a valiant hero or knight with excellent moral character. One example may be Spenser's "Fairie Queen". However, as you are already told, among the lower classes, it was supplanted by the ballad and the *fabliau*—that is a short humorous tale, realistic in subject but satiric in style.

With regard to *metre,* it is curious to observe that with increasing practice the tendency is toward simplicity. The extremely complicated stanzas are becoming simple and less common, and '**rhyme royal'** and other shorter verses were coming into favour. It is this amalgamation of simplicity with freedom that remained the dominating characteristic of English verse of the medieval period.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: In the use metre, what are the changes that you encounter in Medieval poetry?

Q 2: What are the most dominant poetical forms that evolved in Medieval poetry?

Q 3: How did the Ballad come to be composed during the Medieval age?

Q 4: What is a Metrical Romance?

1.4 IMPORTANT MEDIEVAL POETS AND THEIR WORKS

[Adapted from Edward Albert's History]

In this section, we shall try to discuss the important medieval poets and some of their important works.

Geoffrey Chaucer: (1340-1400)

In many documents of the time, Chaucer's name is mentioned with some frequency. And these references, in addition to some remarks he makes regarding himself in the course of his poems, are the sum of what we know about his life. The date of his birth is uncertain, but it is now generally accepted as being 1340. He was born in London, entered the household of the wife of the Duke of Clarence in 1357, and saw military service abroad, where he was captured. Next, he seems to have entered the royal household, for he is frequently mentioned as the recipient of royal pensions and bounties. When Richard II succeeded to the English throne (1377), Chaucer was confirmed in his offices and pensions, and shortly afterwards, he was sent to Italy on one of his several diplomatic missions. Then, ensued a period of

depression probably due to the departure his patron John of Gaunt to Spain in 1386. He was the first poet to be buried in what is now famously known as “Poets’ Corner” in Westminster Abbey.

It is now customary to divide the Chaucerian poems into three stages: the French, the Italian, and the English, of which the last is a development of the first two.

(a) The poems of the French group, which are also the earliest, are closely modelled upon French originals, and the style is clumsy and immature. Of such poems, the longest is *The Romaunt of the Rose,* a lengthy allegorical poem, written in **octosyllabic couplets** and based upon *Le Romaunt de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung. This fragmented poem of 8000 lines was once entirely ascribed to Chaucer. Other poems of this period include *The Book of the Duchesse,* probably his earliest and written in 1369, the year when John of Gaunt’s wife died, *The Compleynt unto Pite, An A.B.C.,* and *The Compleynt of Mars.*

(b) The second or Italian stage shows advancement upon the first. In the handling of the metres, the technical ability is greater, and there is a growing keenness of perception and a greater stretch of originality. To this period belong *Anelida and Arcite* and *The Parlement of Foules.* The characterisation of the birds in the latter poem shows Chaucer’s true comic spirit. *Troilus and Criseyde* is a long poem adapted from Boccaccio. Reality and a passionate intensity underlie its conventions of courtly love. The complex characters of Criseyde and Pandarus reveal a new subtlety of psychological development, and indicate Chaucer’s growing insight into human motives. *Troilus and Criseyde* is held to be Chaucer’s best narrative work of the stage.

Another important poem from this period is *The Hous of Fame,* a dream allegory composed in octosyllabic couplets. In his dream, Chaucer is carried by an eagle to the House of Fame and watches that other candidates for fame approach the throne, some being granted their requests and others refused. In this group is also included *The Legend of Good Women,* in which Chaucer, starting with the intention of telling nineteen affecting tales of virtuous women of antiquity, finishes with eight

accomplished and the ninth only begun. After a charming introduction on the daisy, there is some masterly narrative, particularly in the portion dealing with Cleopatra. The poem is the first known attempt in English to use the heroic couplet, which is none the less handled with great skill and freedom.

(c) The third or English group contains work of the greatest individual accomplishment. The achievement of this period is *The Canterbury Tales,* though one or two of the separate tales may be of slightly earlier composition. For the general idea of the *Tales* Chaucer may be indebted to Boccaccio, but in nearly every important feature, the work is essentially English. For the purposes of his poem, Chaucer draws together twenty-nine pilgrims, including him. They meet at the Tabard Inn, in Southwark in order to go on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Thomas a Becket at Canterbury. The 29 pilgrims are carefully chosen types, of both sexes, and of all ranks, from a knight to a humble ploughman; their occupations and personal peculiarities are many and diverse; and, as they are depicted in the masterly *Prologue* to the main work, they are interesting, alive, and thoroughly human. At the suggestion of the host of the Tabard, and to relieve the tedium of the journey, each of the pilgrims is to tell two tales on the outward journey, and two on the return. In its entirety, the scheme would have resulted in an immense collection of over a hundred tales. However, as it happens, Chaucer finished only twenty, and left four partly complete. There are two prose tales, Chaucer's own *Tale of Melibeus* and *The Parson's Tale.*

During his lifetime, Chaucer built up such a reputation as a poet that many works were at a later date ascribed to him without sufficient evidence. Of this group, the best examples are *The Flower and the Leaf,* quite an excellent example of the dream-allegory type, and *The Court of Love.* It has now been settled that these poems are not truly his. However, Chaucer's Poetry is marked by some important features that are as the following.

(a) The first thing that strikes us is the **unique position** that Chaucer's work occupies in the literature of the age. Besides, he is the forerunner in the race of great literary figures dominating the ages in English poetry.

(b) Among Chaucer's literary virtues, his acute **faculty of observation** is very prominent. He was a man of the world, mixing freely with all types of humankind; and he used his opportunities to observe the little peculiarities of human nature.

(c) Chaucer's **power of descriptions**, of men, manners, and places, are of the first rank in their beauty, impressiveness, and humour. The *Prologue* contains ample material to illustrate Chaucer's power in describing his fellow men.

(d) In the literature of his time, when so few poets seem to have any perception of the fun in life, the **humour** of Chaucer is invigorating and delightful. The prevailing feature of Chaucer's humour is its urbanity: the man of the world's kindly tolerance of the weaknesses of his erring fellow-mortals. Chaucer lays less emphasis on pathos, but it is not overlooked. In the poetry of Chaucer, the sentiment is humane and unforced. We have excellent examples of **pathos** in the tale of the Prioress and in *The Legend of Good Women.*

(e) As a storyteller, Chaucer displays a **powerful narrative technique** exemplified by his fondness for long speeches, pedantic digressions on such subjects as dreams and ethical problems, and long explanations, which could have been avoided if necessary. *Troilus and Criseyde* is an example of his prolixity, while *The Knight's Tale* reveals his haphazard and dawdling methods. Still, both contain many admirable narrative passages.

(f) In the matter of poetical technique, English literature owes much to Chaucer for his **metrical skills**. He virtually imported the decasyllabic line from France to English, and he used it in both stanzaic and couplet forms. The seven-lined stanza *a b a b b c c* became popular as the Chaucerian or *rime royale.*

***William Langland or Langley (1332 –1386)*:**

Langland is the presumed author of a work of Middle English alliterative poetry, generally known as ***Piers Plowman*.** This poem, the full title of which is *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman,* appears in its many manuscripts in three forms, called respectively the A,

B, and C texts. The A text is the shortest, being about 2500 lines long; the B is more than 7200 lines; and the C, which is clearly based upon B, is more than 7300 lines. Until quite recently, it has always been assumed that the three forms were all the work of Langland; but the latest theory is that the A form is the genuine composition of Langland, whereas both B and C may have been composed by a later and inferior poet.

From the personal passages in the poem, it appears that the author was born in Shropshire about 1332. The vision in which he saw Piers the Plowman probably took place in 1362. The poem itself tells of the poet's vision on the Malvern Hills. In this trance, he beholds a fair "feld ful of folk." The first vision, by subtle and baffling changes, merges into a series of dissolving scenes which deal with the adventures of allegorical beings, human like Do-wel, Do-bet, and Do-betst, or of abstract significance like the Lady Meed, Wit, Study, and Faith. During the many incidents of the poem, the virtuous powers generally suffer most, till the advent of Piers the Plowman—the Messianic deliverer—restores the balance to the right side. The underlying motive of the work is to expose the sloth and vice of the Church, and to set on record the struggles and virtues of common folks.

Langland's frequent sketches of homely life are done with sympathy and knowledge, and, unlike Chaucer, he portrays vividly the terrible hardships of the poor peasant. The style has a sombre energy, an intense but crabbed seriousness, and an austere simplicity of treatment. The form of the poem is curious. It is a revival of the Old English rhymeless measure, having alliteration as the basis of the line. The lines themselves are uniform in length, and there is the middle pause, with (as a rule) two alliterations in the first half-line and one in the second. Yet, in spite of the Old English metre, the vocabulary draws freely upon the French, to an extent equal to that of Chaucer himself.

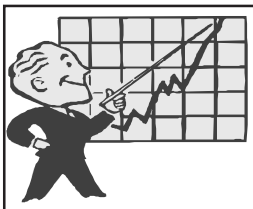
John Gower: (1330–1408)

Gower was an English poet, a contemporary of Langland and a friend of Chaucer. His date of birth is uncertain, but he died in 1408. He was a man of means, and a member of a good Kentish family. The three important works of Gower are noteworthy, for they illustrate the unstable state of

contemporary English literature. His first poem, *Speculum Meditantis,* is written in French; the second, *Vox Clamantis,* is composed in Latin; and the third, *Confessio Amantis,* is written in English, at the King's command according to Gower himself. In the last poem, we can find conventional allegorical setting, with a disquisition on the seven deadly sins, illustrated by many anecdotes. These anecdotes reveal Gower's capacity as a storyteller.

John Barbour: (1320–1395)

Barbour is the first of the Scottish poets. He was born in Aberdeenshire, and studied at both Oxford and Paris. His great work is *Bruce* (1375), a lengthy poem of twenty books and thirteen thousand lines. The work is a history of Scotland's struggle for freedom from the year 1286, until the death of Bruce and the burial of his heart (1332). The heroic theme of the poem is the rise of Bruce, and the central incident of the poem is the battle of Bannockburn. The poem, often rudely but pithily expressed, contains much absurd legends and a good deal of inaccuracy. However, it is no mean beginning to the long series of Scottish heroic poems.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What is the scheme of the poem The Canterbury Tales?

Q 6: Enlist the unique features of Chaucer as a Poet.

Q 7: What are the important works of John Gower?



1.5 LET US SUM UP

As has been intended, this unit must have acquainted you with the context of medieval poetry as well as with the important medieval poets like Chaucer and Langland. You have learnt that by the medieval period, the English language had shaken down to the standard of the East Midland speech, the language of the capital city and of the universities. With regard to poetic diction, French and English amalgamated to form the Standard

English tongue, which gained its first full expression in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. With regard to poetical *metre,* it is curious to observe that simplicity was maintained. The extremely complicated stanzas became simple and less common, and 'rhyme royal' and other shorter verses were coming into favour. Among the famous medieval poets, mention must be made of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, John Gower and John Barbour. You have also learnt that with regard to medieval poetry, we can observe the emergence of various poetical forms like—The Lyric, The Ballad, Allegory, Descriptive and Narrative Poems, as well as the Metrical Romance. However, among the lower classes of the society, metrical romances were supplanted by the ballad and fabliau. The form of poetry, that developed during that period and as practised by Chaucer himself in his *The Canterbury Tales*, is mostly descriptive or narrative. But, the metrical romance was still a popular form. Among the lower classes, metrical romance was supplanted by the ballad. Besides that a growing favour was being shown to the *fabliau*—a short French tale, realistic in subject and humorous satirical in style.



1.6 FURTHER READING

Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms.* (7th Edition). Thomson Learning.

Albert, Edward. (1979). *History of English Literature*. (5th Edition), Oxford University Press.

1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Use of poetical *metres* became simple… …complicated stanzas became simple and less common… …'rhyme royal' became popular… …the amalgamation of simplicity with freedom remained the dominating characteristic of English verse of the medieval period.

Ans to Q No 2: Religious and love-lyrics… …the traditional ballad… …the allegory… …Descriptive and Narrative Poems… …The Metrical Romance.

Ans to Q No 3: Mainly about love, local legends, the feats of local heroes, supernatural happenings, or religious stories, the ballad deals with human beings' elemental passions… …Situations are such as affect the individual or family… …It came to be composed in an impersonal and detached tone.

Ans to Q No 4: **A Metrical Romance is a type of prose poem that** deals with themes such as love, rites of passage, chivalry, adventure and interpersonal relationships… …Knights, fair maidens, and epic journeys appear frequently in a metrical romance… …Spenser's "Fairie Queen" is a great example.

Ans to Q No 5: For the scheme, Chaucer draws together twenty-nine pilgrims, including himself… …they are carefully chosen types as they are depicted so beautifully in the masterly *Prologue* to the main work… …at the suggestion of the host of the Tabard, and to relieve the tedium of the journey, each of the pilgrims is to tell two tales on the outward journey, and two on the return… …however, Chaucer finished only twenty.

Ans to Q No 6: His unique position in the literature of the age… …his power of observation… …power of descriptions… …the use of humour… …his powerful narrative technique… …his metrical skills, especially his use of *rime royale.*

Ans to Q No 7: The three important works of Gower are *Speculum Meditantis* written in French; *Vox Clamantis* written in Latin; and *Confessio Amantis* written in English.



1.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Provide a sketch of the intellectual and social background of Medieval poetry.

Q 2: Discuss the three stages of Chaucer's poetic development with examples from each.

Q 3: Who are the important poets of the Medieval period? Write a note on the important aspects of some of these poets with reference to their works.

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UNIT 2: CHAUCER: THE GENERAL PROLOGUE TO *THE CANTERBURY TALES* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

2.1 Learning Objectives

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2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- have some ideas on the life and works of Chaucer
- assess the significance of Chaucer as the 'father' of English poetic tradition
- examine the context in which the poem *The Canterbury Tales* was written
- discuss Chaucer as a great critic of his contemporary society and the people

2.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to Geoffrey Chaucer, the greatest of the Medieval poets, and his poem *The General Prologue.* A 14th century courtier, a statesman, a soldier, and a politician, Geoffrey Chaucer managed to write a great quantity of poetry. You will read in this unit that he had extraordinary ability for different poetical accomplishments. It was with Chaucer that the English language and literature gradually developed. The poem *The General Prologue* provides the account of a motley group of pilgrims who represent

almost all sections of society, as they happen to meet at the Tabard inn in Southwark and plan to begin their journey to Canterbury under the guidance of the host—Harry Bailly. You will also find it interesting to read that several traditions—popular, learned and courtly, meet in this work. Chaucer was a poet of the court, but he had his readers from all classes of his society. Thus, this unit on his *The General Prologue* intends to introduce you to the kind of poetry that Chaucer used to write, and to make you acknowledge the kind of influence he could exert on his successors as the first important English poet of the 14th century, because of which he became popular as the 'father of English poetry'.

2.3 CHAUCER: THE POET

Chaucer's authority as the 'father' of the English poetic canon is almost undisputed. In the following subsections, you will get to read briefly about his life history as well as about his most famous poetic works, which would guarantee his position as a real craftsman among his contemporaries.



Source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org

2.3.1 His Life

Geoffrey Chaucer came from a family of wine-merchants. He was born in 1343/44. During his childhood, the "Great Plague" or "Black Death" took place and many of the English villages were wiped out. When he was a young boy of only 14 years or so, he was engaged as a page boy in the services of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster and her husband Prince Lionel, son of Edward III. In 1359, he became a squire, well versed in the arts of Chivalry-fighting battles as well as paying court and Christian duty. The Squire in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a reflection of his own days as a squire. In the early 1360s, Chaucer withdrew from the court to study for a

while at Oxford or Cambridge. He made many trips abroad to Europe in the King's service and became well acquainted with Italian and French literature.

Chaucer married Phillipa Roet, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Phillipa and became close to John of Gaunt, Edward's third son, next only to the King. He wrote his first poem *The Book of the Duchess* as memorial for Blanche, John of Gaunt's first wife. The experiences he gathered through his career as courtier, man of affairs, and civil servant brought him into firm contact with people of all ranks and professions and provided great opportunities for observing his fellow men. When Chaucer travelled to Italy in 1372-73 on diplomatic mission to Genoa, and then to Florence, he came across the works of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch which widened and deepened his literary resources and encouraged him to seek newer and wider fields. He was particularly inspired by Dante's great work *Divine Comedy,* a poem that could encompass a wide range of ideas and feelings beyond any other work of those times. Chaucer fully used the intellectual and imaginative resources of the Middle Ages to present the moral and theological universe in which medieval men lived. Chaucer also tried to bring alive the psychological and social world of his time which turns out also to be the contemporary world of ours.

Chaucer is credited with standardising the Middle English language from a combination of the Kentish and Midlands dialects. However, many would like to argue that this is an over statement as the influence of the court and bureaucracy of which Chaucer was a part also remains a more probable influence on the development of the Standard English language. Chaucer placed the English language almost on the same level as French, which was then the official language. He also enriched the English language with many new words and phrases. For these reasons, he was termed the 'father' of modern English. If you read Chaucer's work, you will find that he follows certain medieval traditions like—dream allegory and courtly love. However, you will also notice that modern ideas like—

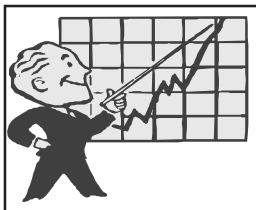
humour, practical realism and characters drawn from all classes of society also make an entry into the world of Chaucer. Chaucer brought many new things to English literature and thus dominated the 15th century English literary field. William Caxton, who brought printing to England, thought that *The Canterbury Tales* was the most suitable work to be published, as it was the work of the man who, according to him, "embellished, ornated and made fair our English."



LET US KNOW

Chaucer made important contributions to English Literature by using English at a time when much courtly poetry was written in either French or Latin. His use of the English language encouraged his followers and imitators to write in English. This speeded the transition of the English language from the French as the language of literature in the subsequent periods.

His poems like *The House of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde* were written after his Italian experience. After the death of Edward III, there was bitter in fighting in court and Chaucer disappeared from royal service for the next few years to write his greatest classic work *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer moved back to London and rented a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey. He died on 25th October 1400, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. He left behind a grand legacy for the English life—the creation of a language and a poetic tradition unequalled for a long time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What were the experiences that moulded Chaucer's literary career in his later life?

Q 2: What did William Caxton say in praise of Chaucer?

Q 3: What role did Chaucer play in perfecting the English language?

2.3.2 His Poetic Works

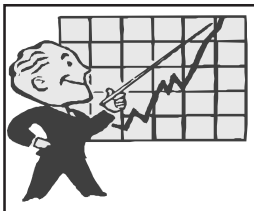
So far, you must have realised why Chaucer is considered the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages. Although the chronology of his works is not so certain, much critical attention has been attributed to his role in standardising the English language. Chaucer, for most of his life, was greatly influenced by the classical and European literature available to him. He was a poet, a songwriter and a great translator. Chaucer began his poetic career by translating one of the most famous of all medieval poems —*The Romance of the Rose* from French. His next famous poem *The Book of the Duchess*, in the tradition of dream allegory, was written at the end of 1369 to commemorate the death of Blanche, the Duchess of Lancaster, and to console the bereaved duke. Similarly, his other works too can be put into an approximate order in terms of their relation to each other, the dates of known sources, and the influences of French and Italian traditions. For example, *House of Fame* is probably Chaucer's next work on which the influence of Dante's *Divine Comedy* is very prominent. This is yet another dream poem, which actually opens with the discussion of dreams themselves. Early poems such as *The Book of the Duchess* are influenced by French literary forms. Later, he was influenced by contemporary Italian writers such as Boccaccio and Petrarch. And, by the time, he wrote *The Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*, he had already developed his own distinctive style as a poet.

The Parliament of Fowls is a poem in the dream convention in which the influence of Dante and Boccaccio only enriches the style and the content of the poem. This poem is significant for Chaucer's unique style of metrical verse form known as "Rhyme Royal" consisting of seven-line-stanza (rhyming *ababbcc*). He may have adapted the form from a French Ballade stanza or from the Italian Ottova Rima, with the omission of the fifth line. This particular form derived its name from its use by the King James I of Scotland

in his famous *King's Quair. The Parliament of Fowls* is actually a poem that celebrates Saint Valentine's Day. *Troilus and Criseyde* had probably been written in the middle of 1380s. This poem extols Chaucer's genius as a storyteller and metrical technician. According to the literary historian David Daiches, it is in a sense, the first real 'novel' in English as it tells a love story with a delicacy of psychological awareness, a brilliant handling of details, a firm hold over the structure, and controlled digression. "Ryme Royal" has been adapted to the changing demand of the narrative. Its immediate source is Boccaccio's Il Filostrato, although Chaucer adds a multidimensionality to this work by incorporating moral overtones, subtle psychology and varied details. In *The Legend of Good Women* Chaucer returns to the love-vision as his framework. This is an unfinished work that portrays faithful women, like Cleopetra, Medea, Lucrece, Ariadne, Philomela as a direct contrast with the faithless women like Criseyde in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

However, it is with the poem *The Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer's reputation as a poet comes to the forefront. Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury was canonised as a saint and became St. Thomas A' Becket. His shrine at Canterbury became very famous as a pilgrimage centre and acquired a reputation for miraculous cure for all diseases. Pilgrims came to this place from all places particularly during the springtime. Chaucer bases the scheme of his *The Canterbury Tales* on these pilgrims making their way to the famous Pilgrimage centre of Canterbury Cathedral. There were total 29 pilgrims. The poem too followed a unique scheme—two stories from each of the pilgrims on the outward journey, and two again on the return that would contribute to more than a hundred stories. However, unfortunately, Chaucer could finish only twenty and left four partly complete. *The General Prologue, which* sets the scene and establishes the character, was probably written in 1380s. Chaucer in this poem drew his literary experiences from his observations of men of different occupations during his days.

Chaucer's father's house was near the River Thames quays (platforms where goods were loaded or unloaded from ships), his father being a wine merchant. Nearby lived the nobility, merchants, beggars, craftsmen, whores, politicians and churchmen. Therefore, Chaucer's boyhood was crowded with every type and profession and he knew the London of his times quite thoroughly. These experiences were sure to have helped him in creating his characters for *The General Prologue*.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Name some of the great works of Chaucer?

Q 5: What do you mean by 'Dream Vision'? In which poems, does Chaucer use 'Dream Vision' as a technique?

Q 6: Explain the proposed structure of *The Canterbury Tales*?

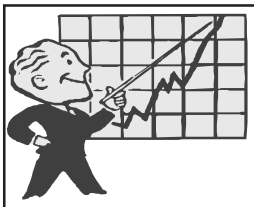
Q 7: What is Rhyme Royal? Why is it called so?

2.4 Chaucer as a Social Critic

The considerations of the features of *The General Prologue* establish his position as a social critic. The poem reflects many of Chaucer's own preoccupations and attitudes. For example, his hatred for the corruption in church and his hopes for an equal and free society are reflected in the various character portrayals of *The Prologue*. The characters of the Friar, the Monk, the Summoner and the Pardoner clearly reflect Chaucer's social criticism of church corruption. By creating his characters as types representing every possible profession and status of society, giving them their individuality, Chaucer creates real living beings that represent their own age. The best way to discuss the significance of Chaucer as a social critic is to examine the various characters from their personal traits. There are certain characters among the pilgrims, who are presented as ideal virtuous types like the Parson, the Ploughman and the Knight. Each of these characters has important roles to

play in society. For example, the Knight is a man at the top of the social ladder and he shows excellent example to others by his loyalty to his knightly vows of chivalry, virtuousness and idealism. The Parson fulfils his mission in the Church, by serving the poor just like a true Christian, and his brother the Ploughman shows that humanity and service to society can exist even in the midst of personal difficulties like poverty. The Parson and the Ploughman seem like the incarnation of Christ serving his people.

You will understand the fact that Chaucer's *General Prologue* is one of the greatest pieces of realistic literature, if you examine his presentation of society in all its aspects. Vice is presented in the form of characters who are arch villains. For example, the Pardoner and the Summoner, who terrorise and threaten people for personal gain; the Miller and the Reeve who cheat common people and their employers for money. Chaucer also presents the artifice and hypocrisy of his society, through his portrayal of characters like the Prioress, the Guildsmen and their wives who took their servants with them on their pilgrimage. By drawing a true picture of the contemporary society in all its aspects, good and bad, Chaucer showed himself to be an excellent social critic as well as one of the greatest writers of all time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Assess the significance of Chaucer as a social critic.

Q 9: Comment briefly on Chaucer's poetic style.



2.5 LET US SUM UP

By this time, you should be familiar with Chaucer and his poem *The General Prologue*. From the sections that you have read, you must have realised that Chaucer's position in the history of English poetry can never

be questioned. His genius as one of the greatest of the English poets is revealed through his narrative style in *The General Prologue*. You have found that *The Prologue* has an unusual framework. It is a work, where the narrator is also a character in his own fiction. Chaucer himself is one of the pilgrims who is a simple rural person and who joins the pilgrims at the inn at Southwerk. Chaucer's greatness lies in his being a comic writer which is prevalent in the *Prologue*. You have also seen how Chaucer uses the comic devices of irony, satire and pun to enhance the personal details and human faults and failings, artifice and hypocrisy of the pilgrims that every true person possesses. Through his brilliant comedy, Chaucer depicts a vivid, realistic picture of the medieval society as well as the true human world. Besides these, Chaucer's skill as a fictional writer, his dramatic qualities of description and narrative skill emerge beautifully in *The Prologue* and prove the truth of the accepted opinion of Chaucer as the 'Father' of English Poetry.



2.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Chaucer's experience as a page boy… …experience as a squire… …experiences gained from visit to Europe… …acquaintance with Italian and French literature etc.

Ans to Q No 2: Chaucer used the intellectual and imaginative resources of the middle ages... ...This made Caxton say that Chaucer "embellished, ornated and made fair our English."

Ans to Q No 3: Chaucer standardised the Middle English language… …he placed the English language almost on the same level as French… …he added many new words and phrases to the English language.

Ans to Q No 4: *The Book of the Duchess… …The House of Fame… …The Parliament of Fowls… …The Legend of Good Women… …Troilus and Criseyde… …The Canterbury Tales.*

Ans to Q No 5: It is a type of narrative popular in the middle ages… …dream visions were a popular form of storytelling in the middle ages these are mainly allegorical… …*The Book of the Duchess, The Parliament of Fowls* are some examples.

Ans to Q No 6: *The General Prologue* follows a unique scheme… …two stories from each pilgrim on the outward journey, and two again on the return… …however, the poem remains unfinished… …Chaucer drew his literary experiences from his observations of men and society.

Ans to Q No 7: It is a unique style of metrical verse consisting of seven-line-stanza rhyming *ababbcc*… …It is called so due to royal use… …King James I of Scotland in his famous *King's Quair* used the verse form.

Ans to Q No 8: Chaucer both describes and satirises… …he is very true to tradition and presents everything with truth… ...Chaucer's characters are presented as typical human beings of their own times although some are universal human figures.

Ans to Q No 9: Chaucer's hatred for church corruption are reflected in the various character portrayals like that of the Friar, the Monk, the Summons and the Pardoner… …he creates characters as types representing every possible profession and status of society… …and the portrayals are done from their personal traits.



2.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Comment on Chaucer's contributions to Medieval English poetry?

Q 2: In what ways, do you think, can Chaucer be considered the father of English poetry? Discuss in detail.

Q 3: *The General Prologue* offers a detailed picture of English social life in action. How does Chaucer's own life influence the writing of *The Prologue*?

Q 4: How far do you think Chaucer's presentation of the characters is true to our own times?

Q 5: Mention some important aspects of the medieval society as revealed through the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*.

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UNIT 3: CHAUCER'S THE GENERAL PROLOGUE TO *THE CANTERBURY TALES* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

3.1 Learning Objectives

3.2 Introduction

3.3 The Poem: *The General Prologue*

- 3.3.1 Extracts from the Text of the Poem
- 3.3.2 Reading the Poem
- 3.3.3 Chaucer's Characterisation
- 3.3.4 Chaucer's Poetic Style

3.4 Let us Sum up

3.5 Further Reading

3.6 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

3.7 Possible Questions

3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- read the poem *The General Prologue* in terms of its various aspects
- make a list of the characters in the poem and examine their type
- explain Chaucer's art of characterisation
- assess Chaucer's poetic style
- discuss Chaucer as a social critic

3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals exclusively with Chaucer's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. From the previous unit, you have learnt that *The Canterbury Tales* was written in the last phase of Chaucer's poetic career. It is probably his most ambitious project. You are expected to go through the whole *General Prologue,* but we are providing only the first 100 lines in original and modern English version. It has been done to enable learners like you to get an idea of Chaucer's English language while at the same

time understanding the poem through modern English. When the Hundred Years War was still on and when the social setup of England was almost devastated, the framework of *The Canterbury Tales* was a significant decision to bring the people together. You will note from your reading of the unit that this poem is regarded as one of the greatest works of Medieval English literature.

3.3 The Poem: *The General Prologue*

In the following subsections, an attempt has been made to discuss the various aspects of the poem in terms of the different important aspects like the storyline, Chaucer's art of characterisation and poetic style.

3.3.1 Extracts from the Text of the Poem (1-100 lines)

[Original Version Taken from http://www.librarius.com/canttran/gptrfs.htm & Modern Version taken from Nevill Coghill's translation of *The General Prologue*]

Original Version

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye-
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende

Modern Version

When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram* has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
And specially, from every shire's end

Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke.
Bifil that in that seson, on a day,

In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay
Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
At nyght was come into that hostelrye
Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye
Of sondry folk, by aventure yfalle
In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle,
That toward Caunterbury wolden ryde.
The chambres and the stables weren wyde,
And wel we weren esed atte beste;
And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
That I was of hir felaweshipe anon,
And made forward erly for to ryse
To take our wey, ther as I yow devyse.
But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne;
And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne.

A KNYGHT ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.

Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.

It happened in that season that one day
In Southwark, at *The Tabard*, as I lay
Ready to go on pilgrimage and start
For Canterbury, most devout at heart,
At night there came into that hostelry
Some nine and twenty in a company
Of sundry folk happening then to fall
In fellowship, and they were pilgrims all
That towards Canterbury meant to ride.
The rooms and stables of the inn were wide:
They made us easy, all was of the best.
And, briefly, when the sun had gone to rest,
I'd spoken to them all upon the trip
And was soon one with them in fellowship,
Pledged to rise early and to take the way
To Canterbury, as you heard me say.
But none the less, while I have time and space,
Before my story takes a further pace,
It seems a reasonable thing to say
What their condition was, the full array
Of each of them, as it appeared to me,
According to profession and degree,
And what apparel they were riding in;
And at a Knight I therefore will begin.

There was a Knight, a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
To ride abroad had followed chivalry,
Truth, honor, generousness, and courtesy.

Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,
And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,
As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,
And evere honoured for his worthynesse.
At Alisaundre he was, whan it was wonne.
Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne
Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
In Lettow hadde he reysed, and in Ruce,
No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye.
At Lyeys was he and at Satalye,
Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See
At many a noble armee hadde he be.
At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene,
And foughten for oure feith at Tramyssene
In lystes thries, and ay slayn his foo.
This ilke worthy knyght hadde been also
Somtyme with the lord of Palatye
Agayn another hethen in Turkye.
And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys;
And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.
But, for to tellen yow of his array,
His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.
Of fustian he wered a gypon
Al bismotered with his habergeoun,
For he was late ycome from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrymage.
With hym ther was his sone, a yong SQUIER,

He had done nobly in his sovereign's war
And ridden into battle, no man more,
As well in Christian as in heathen places,
And ever honored for his noble graces.
When we took Alexandria, he was there.
He often sat at table in the chair
Of honor, above all nations, when in Prussia.
In Lithuania he had ridden, and Russia,
No Christian man so often, of his rank.
When, in Granada, Algeciras sank
Under assault, he had been there, and in
North Africa, raiding Benamarin;
In Anatolia he had been as well
And fought when Ayas and Attalia fell,
For all along the Mediterranean coast
He had embarked with many a noble host.
In fifteen mortal battles he had been
And jousted for our faith at Tramissene
Thrice in the lists, and always killed his man.
This same distinguished knight had led the van
Once with the Bey of Balat, doing work
For him against another heathen Turk;
He was of sovereign value in all eyes.
And though so much distinguished, he was wise
And in his bearing modest as a maid.
He never yet a boorish thing had said
In all his life to any, come what might;
He was a true, a perfect gentle-knight.
Speaking of his equipment, he possessed
Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.
He wore a fustian tunic stained and dark
With smudges where his armor had left mark;
Just home from service, he had joined our ranks

A lovyere and a lusty bacheler;
With lokkes crulle, as they were leyd in presse.
Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gesse.
Of his stature he was of evene lengthe,
And wonderly delyvere, and of greet strengthe.
And he hadde been somtyme in chyvachie
In Flaundres, in Artoys, and Pycardie,
And born hym weel, as of so litel space,
In hope to stonden in his lady grace.
Embrouded was he, as it were a meede,
Al ful of fresshe floures, whyte and reede;
Syngynge he was, or floytynge, al the day,
He was as fressh as is the monthe of May.
Short was his gowne, with sleves longe and wyde.
Wel koude he sitte on hors, and faire ryde.
He koude songes make, and wel endite,
Juste, and eek daunce, and weel purtreye and write.
So hoote he lovede, that by nyghtertale
He slepte namoore than dooth a nyghtyngale.
Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable,
And carf biforn his fader at the table.

To do his pilgrimage and render thanks.
He had his son with him, a fine young Squire,
A lover and cadet, a lad of fire
With locks as curly as if they had been pressed.
He was some twenty years of age, I guessed.
In stature he was of a moderate length,
With wonderful agility and strength.
He'd seen some service with the cavalry
In Flanders and Artois and Picardy
And had done valiantly in little space
Of time, in hope to win his lady's grace.
He was embroidered like a meadow bright
And full of freshest flowers, red and white.
Singing he was, or fluting all the day;
He was as fresh as is the month of May.
Short was his gown, the sleeves were long and wide;
He knew the way to sit a horse and ride.
He could make songs and poems and recite,
Knew how to joust and dance, to draw and write.
He loved so hotly that till dawn grew pale
He slept as little as a nightingale.
Courteous he was, lowly and serviceable,
And carved to serve his father at the table.

3.3.2 Reading the Poem

The original scheme of Chaucer, as you have been informed, was to produce an immense collection of over a hundred tales as each of the pilgrims were to tell two stories on the outward journey and two on the return. However, Chaucer could finish only twenty and left four partly complete. The poem *The Canterbury Tales* is incomplete also in the sense that whatever survive of the original plan are just some fragments, usually consisting of two or more

tales whose sequence is clear. Scholars however, accept almost unanimously, the order of the famous 15th century Ellesmere Manuscript of the poem on which perhaps the subsequent versions of the poem are based.

The 'plot' of the *Canterbury Tales* is not very difficult to understand. In early April, the narrator is lodged at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, ready to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury. At the same time, a group of twenty-nine pilgrims arrives at the Inn. The narrator also becomes a part of this group and subsequently provides significant character portraits of the participants in the group, each representing a different aspect of the English society. The host of the Tabard Inn, Harry Baily, too decides to join the pilgrims, and proposes a game to divert them on the road: all will tell stories, and the best tale will be rewarded at the end of the journey with a supper. The bulk of the poem thus consists of the tales of twenty-three pilgrims. However, Chaucer's description of the pilgrims in his *Prologue* remains to be one of the most vivid, varied and extensive pieces of character drawing in English literature. It consists of 878 lines (as you find in Nevill Coghill's translation of the book) that form an entire work of literature of its own. The text contains three parts: a short introduction, the series of portraits of the pilgrims, and their agreement to a tale (story)-telling game. You should note that the twenty-nine pilgrims Chaucer took were carefully chosen types, of both sexes, of all ranks from the Knight to the Plowman. As depicted in the *Prologue,* their occupation and personal peculiarities are many, yet they are interesting as types but have successfully maintained their individual traits.

Look at the first lines of the *Prologue.* It begins with an invocation to the month of April, the season of spring, when this joyful season inspires the world of nature into growth and new life.

"When in April the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power

As brings about the engendering of the flower,
When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the *Ram* has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
That sleep away the night with open eye
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages"

These lines indicate nature awakening to new life with the coming of spring after the long draught of winter. It begins with a description of the month of April in which the change from the cold dreamy winter to the 'life giving spring' is clearly perceived. In the context of the poem, spring means a veritable new lease of life in society. But, this is not all. Chaucer also implicitly refers to the other important aspects of nature—'regenerational', 'vegetational', 'habitational' whose presence in these lines makes the context of the poem brilliantly presented before the readers like us. You find that the West wind is personified as the God Zyphuros whose sweet breath inspires new life in the spring season. The lines also refer to the Sun passing through the Zodiac sign of the Ram (Aries) during springtime, thereby presenting before us a possible date in the month of April, probably the 11th April, on which the poem was perhaps written.

Chaucer then starts his descriptions of the pilgrims, portraying the society of medieval England and giving us a glimpse of humankind with their positive and negative aspects. He does this with humour and realism as well as with great insights into the truths of human nature. It seems that in describing the pilgrims, the medieval division of the three estates i.e. the military estate, the clerical estate, and the professional estate is strictly followed by Chaucer. The pilgrims are grouped in order of social precedence. The military order begins with the Knight, the Squire and the Yeoman

who form the first group in the poem. The knight and his son Squire are aristocrats and they travel with their servant, the Yeoman. In the clerical (or religious) order of the Church are included the Prioress, the Nun, the Monk, and the Friar almost all of whom ignore the religious vows and live luxurious life ignoring the duties delegated to them by the Church. The professional class includes characters like the Merchant who is an expert in business dealings, the Clerk who is a student studying for career in the church, the Sergeant of the Law who is the king's servant in legal matters, the Five Guildsmen who are the members of a trade and craft guild. You have read in your social history course that the Guilds in medieval cities were organisations of social life. The Shipman is also the captain of the ship that sails from Dartmouth on the coast of Devon, the Doctor or physician is a master of his art. Then we also find the Wife of Bath, a very important lady. She is extremely skilful in her profession of the cloth-making trade. But Chaucer treats her with bold humour. Another minor character is the Manciple, who is a servant of a college or inns or court, who purchased the provisions, and was not above cheating.

In *The Prologue*, Chaucer gives a good representation to the rural countryside, for a good number of characters are from the country. Among them are: the Franklin who is a country gentlemen and a landholder and therefore a rich man. He is shown to be very hospitable and benevolent. The list of other such characters include the Parson who is the ideal Parish priest free from the faults of the other churchmen and an extremely good man who cares for his parishioners more than himself, the Ploughmen, brother of the Parson, who is poor but good. But Chaucer portrays the characters of the Miller, the Reeve, the Summoner, and the Pardoner as dishonest ones. The Miller is engaged in grinding corn for the farmers but successfully continues his monopoly business that leads to frequent quarrels with his customers. Similarly, the Reeve, an estate manager, makes profits by cheating his master. The Summoner is

a minor official in the Church who summons accused persons to the Bishop's court to be tried for sins. He is a corrupt and vicious man who uses his power to blackmail people. The Pardoner, on the other hand sells 'pardons' or 'indulgencies', which were reductions of punishment imposed by an ecclesiastical (religious) court. The Pardoner is the last of the corrupt pilgrims that Chaucer portrays.



LET US KNOW

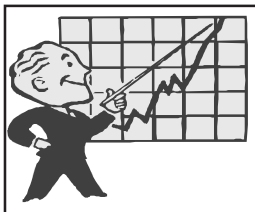
You have seen that *The General Prologue* is an exposition and introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*. The realistic and lively style that Chaucer employed in the *Prologue* makes us imagine that we are meeting real people in real life situation. At the same time, Chaucer remains true to his tradition. For example, the highest and lowest members would not go on a pilgrimage; for serfs and poor peasants were not free to travel and a nobleman would only travel with his own group. There are only two women characters in the group of pilgrims: the Wife of Bath and the Prioress, because, usually women did not travel alone, but these two women did, because they were independent and were their own mistresses.

You should further note that in order to differentiate one character from the other, Chaucer has given each character a different profession. You should not be surprised to find that this differentiation is also signified by the dresses they wear and the particular ways they behave with others. This is because, in Chaucer's time, each rank or profession had distinctive features even to the smallest details of costumes. For example, the Knight, the Miller, the Clerk, the Merchant—all are distinctive and differentiated from each other by their costume, manners and speech, which also appropriate their respective profession and social status. Thus, we find the Knight in warlike attire, the squire "embroidered like a meadow", and the Merchant in a "motley dress."

Some characters like the Monk and the Clerk are even presented with some biographical note. Thus, in keeping with the miscellaneous characters, a wide range of tastes and interests is represented by the tales the characters tell. At the same time, Chaucer's use of humour is another quality that gives his characters their amazing life and realism. For example, the Squire's lock of hair is described as "laid in press", the Wife of Bath's hat weighs 10 bs, the Reeve has thin skinny legs etc. However, you will notice that Chaucer, in most of such humorous portrayals is sympathetic, except in the case of the Monk and the Friar whom Chaucer satirises. If humour is marked by the sense of the comic, then Chaucer emerges as a great humourist when he describes the hunting Monk who is fat and whose baldhead 'shines like a looking glass'. On the other hand, the Friar is presented as a 'festive fellow' and as Chaucer writes: "Therefore instead of weeping and of prayers/One should give silver for a poor Friar's care." Another important aspect that you must consider is—individuals as the pilgrims are, they are also representatives. Many of them exhibit types—for example, the 'gentle Knight', the 'venal Friar', and 'he Hypocrite Pardoner' etc.

Nevill Coghill, the famous translator of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* writes: "In all literature there is nothing that touches or resembles the *Prologue*. It is the concise portrait of the nation, high and low, old and young, male and female, lay and clerical learned and ignorant, rogue and righteous, land and sea, town and country, but without extremes. Apart from the stunning clarity, touched with nuance, of the characters presented, the most noticeable thing about them is their normality. They are the perennial progeny of men and women. Sharply individual, together they make a party…The tales these pilgrims tell come from all over Europe, many of them from the works of Chaucer's near contemporaries. They exemplify the whole range of contemporary European imagination, then particularly addicted to stories, especially to stories that had some sharp point and deducible maxim, moral, or idea. Almost every tale ends with a

piece of proverbial or other wisdom derived from it and with a general benediction on the company." (Coghil, 17) Because of the vivid reality of the characters as well as the inclusive representation of the English society, *The Canterbury Tales* has been meaningfully called a Human Comedy by many.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How are the portraits in *The General Prologue* grouped?

Q 2: How does Chaucer portray his contemporary society in *The General Prologue*?

Q 3: How does the plot of the poem *The General Prologue* start?

Q 4: How is the month of April portrayed by Chaucer?

Q 5: How did costume represent rank during Chaucer's time?

3.3.3 Chaucer's Art of Characterisation

Through the characters in *The Prologue,* Chaucer wanted to show his audience different aspects of his contemporary society and its people. The idea of the pilgrimage was made only to make it serve as the background for his story because it was the only occasion when people from different walks of life and social strata, could come together on an equal footing. Moreover, Chaucer includes only those characters, which were likely to go on a pilgrimage. We have to realise that it was also a fashion among the people of the higher ranks to go on pilgrimages with a retinue that included the so-called lower class people like the serfs or the poor peasants who were otherwise not free to travel. Women did not usually travel, unless they were independent like the Wife of Bath, or in a superior position like the Prioress—the Reverend Mother of a Convent.

Thus, Chaucer is seen to have divided the characters into groups, using the medieval divisions of society into estates: the military estates, the clerical estate and worker's estate. Chaucer

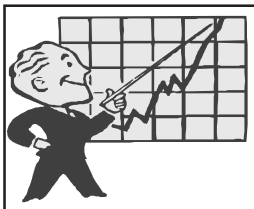
groups the people (the characters) on the basis of the tenets of medieval social precedence placing the Knight as an aristocrat at the beginning. He has also created a large group from the Middle Class—the new, upcoming class of medieval society which reflects the changes transforming medieval social life, particularly with the rising importance of money. Have a look at the following list of characters in the frame of the poem. [Adapted from http://www.librarius.com/canttran/gptrfs.htm]

What is most interesting about Chaucer's characterisation is the fact that he presented the characters as typical human beings with their strengths and weaknesses, faults and failings, good and bad qualities the details of which you can read in the longer version of the poem. The characters (portraits) emerge before the readers as typical human beings in their social, economic and moral dimensions. A very important aspect of the characters is that they are both types and individuals. As types, commonly known and recognised by the audience, they are familiar to both the literate as well as illiterate people. For example, the hunting **Monk,** the corrupt **Friar**, the dedicated **Knight**, the gay and fun loving **Squire**, the **Prioress** and the **good Parson**—all could readily be identified. These characters also became well known to people in popular literary traditions. While, as individuals, the characters also have a distinct identity of their own. They emerge as people with distinctively recognisable human traits. Each character is a member of his/her class or profession but is also an individual with definite personal qualities like: the Prioress's love of jewellery and her tendency of showing off her table manners before the other pilgrims; the Friar's love of wine and women's company, and the **Wife of Bath's** tendency of always aspiring to be the first in the line. So, Chaucer's art of characterisation makes room for reading the poem in the context of the medieval society which was transitional in different ways during the post-feudal England.



LET US KNOW

The 14th century England was an age of political upheavals with the Hundred Years War being fought between England and France. Along with this, it was a period when the 'Black Death' and the 'Peasants' Revolt' occurred. As far as the *Prologue* is concerned, Chaucer tried to maintain the 'feudal hierarchy' in the portraits of the pilgrims to a considerable extent. However, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* does refer to some of the professions that emerged as an effect of the breakdown of the feudal system.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: How did Chaucer chose his Pilgrims?

Q 7: What are the important aspects of Chaucer's characters?

3.3.4 Chaucer's Poetic Style

Geoffrey Chaucer was an important craftsman moulding the English language with much subtlety and flexibility. It is often stated that Chaucer's European consciousness enabled him to render in the English language the dominant themes and attitudes of European literature. His relaxed attitude enabled him to contemplate the varieties of human nature portrayed with sympathy, irony and amusement. His technical brilliance lies in his metrical handling of language with breadth of view, knowledge, interests and the experience of life. While discussing Chaucer's style Christopher Cannon writes:

"Although we do not understand ourselves to be thinking along these lines now, we still employ this theory every time we say that a line of poetry, or a particular turn of phrase, is 'Chaucerian'. For the subtle but sure consequence of assuming that language and 'the artist' are equivalent is the belief that a writer's work is as

cohesive as personhood (its parts are so integral that they form an indivisible whole) and just as distinctive (entirely unlike the work of any other person). In the case of Chaucer, such 'style' is the 'peculiar complexity' which sets his writing apart as if it were itself an individual. It is 'the meanings and values that make him Chaucer'."

This above-mentioned quotation summarises almost every aspect of Chaucer's poetic style.

The General Prologue reaches the heights of greatness as one of the most brilliant pieces of literature of the medieval times. The greatness of the poem lies in its variety. The collection of tales represents not only a remarkably perfect poem but excellent drama. In addition, the collection of portraits of the pilgrims who came together at the inn before setting on their journey represented a wide range of psychological types of human characters. Through its depiction of the vast range of human figures, *The Prologue* and *The Canterbury Tales* present a total picture of the 14th century English society. The style in which this poem is written also gives us an insight into the attitudes of the people towards a variety of subjects, which concerned the life and society of those times such as the church, marriage, money (materialism), the relationship between men and women, and also the position of women in a male dominated society.



LET US KNOW

Chaucer's Humour

The humour, which steeps nearly all his poetry, has great variety: kindly and patronising, as in the case of the Clerk of Oxenford; broad and semi-farcical, as in the Wife of Bath; pointedly satirical, as in the Pardoner and the Summoner; or coarse, as happens in the tales of the Miller, the Reeve, and the Cook. It is seldom that the satirical intent is wholly lacking, as it is in the case of the Good Parson, but, except in rare cases, the satire is good-humoured and well meant.



3.4 LET US SUM UP

This unit must have helped you to read the poem *The General Prologue* in terms of its various issues and aspects. By now, you must have gained some ideas on Chaucer's art of characterisation and on how he used to draw the various characters for this poem from various walks of his contemporary times. You have learnt that Geoffrey Chaucer was a real craftsman moulding the English language with much subtlety and flexibility. His relaxed attitude enabled him to contemplate the varieties of human nature portrayed with sympathy, irony and amusement. Finally, this unit has helped you to consider Chaucer as a social critic because through this poem he reflects his own preoccupations, attitudes and views on the ills of society.



3.5 FURTHER READING

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3.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: In terms of three estates—the military estate, the clerical estate and the estate of workers… …in order of social hierarchy… …The military order begins with the Knight, the Squire and the Yeoman… …. the clerical (religious) order of the Church include—the Prioress, a nun, the monk and the friar… …the professional class includes the Merchant, the Clerk, the Sergeant of the Law, Five Guildsmen, the Cook, the Shipman etc.

Ans to Q No 2: Chaucer used language with much subtlety and flexibility… ... he handled the English language with breadth of view, the knowledge, the interests and the experience of life.

Ans to Q No 3: The poem starts in early April as the narrator is lodged at the Tabard Inn, ready to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury. Arrival of twenty nine pilgrims ... ... the narrator also becomes a part of this group and subsequently provides significant character portraits of the participants in the group, each representing a different aspect of the English society... ..., the host of the Inn, Harry Baily, proposes a game to divert them on the road: all will tell stories, and the best tale will be rewarded at the end of the journey with a supper... ... the poem thus consists of the tales of twenty-three pilgrims.

Ans to Q No 4: In the month of April, change from the cold dreamy winter to the 'life giving spring' is clearly perceived… …spring means a veritable new lease of life in society… …Chaucer refers to three other important aspects of nature—'regenerational', 'vegetational', 'habitational'… ...West wind is personified as the God Zyphuros.

Ans to Q No 5: the Knight, the Miller, the Clerk, the Merchant—all are distinctive and differentiated from each other by their costume… … the Knight is found in a warlike attire, the squire "embroidered like a meadow", and the Merchant in a "motley dress."… …in keeping with

the miscellaneous characters like the monk, a wide range of tastes and interests is represented by the tales the characters tell.

Ans to Q No 6: Chaucer chose them from different walks of life and social strata… …Chaucer included only those characters, which were likely to go on a pilgrimage… … the people of the higher ranks going on pilgrimages with a retinue was very common… …such pilgrimage also included lower class people like the serfs or peasants who were otherwise not free to travel… …Women did not usually travel, unless they were independent like the Wife of Bath, or in a superior position like the Prioress—the Reverend Mother of a Convent.

Ans to Q No 7: They are both types and individuals… …they are both the literate as well as illiterate people… …characters like the Monk, the Friar, the Knight, the Squire, the Prioress and the good Parson—all could readily be identified as types… …but each character is a member of his/her class or profession, but is also an individual with definite personal qualities like: the Prioress's love of jewellery, the Friar's love of wine etc.



3.7 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: From your study of the portraits of *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, discuss some of the striking details about these characters.

Q 2: *The Prologue* has been referred to as the mini portrait of a nation. Discuss *The Prologue* as a reflection of medieval society.

Q 3: Discuss the Prioress, the Wife of Bath, The Monk and the Friar as examples of Chaucer's humour, satire and irony.

Q 4: What do the ideal characters in Chaucer's *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* indicate? Discuss some of them like the Knight, the Poor Parson and the Ploughman.

Q 5: The depraved characters in *The Prologue* indicate the truth of human life and society. Discuss in detail two of such characters—the Summoner and the Pardoner.

Q 6: The Prologue has been called a portrait gallery of the 14th century England. Discuss.

Q 7: Chaucer's characters have been said to be types as well as individuals. Discuss and illustrate your answer with examples from the text.

Q 8: Discuss the Church characters as presented in *The Prologue*. How is the village priest so different from the Pardoner and Summoner?

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UNIT 4: THOMAS WYATT & HENRY HOWARD, EARL OF SURREY: THE APPEAL "AND WILT THOU LEAVE ME THUS?" (WYATT) & *"LOVE THAT DOTH REIGN AND LIVE WITHIN MY THOUGHT"* (SURREY)

UNIT STRUCTURE

4.1 Learning Objectives

4.2 Introduction

4.3 The Sonnet Tradition

4.4 Thomas Wyatt: The Poet

4.5 Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey: The Poet

4.6 Reading Wyatt's *The Appeal "And wilt thou leave me thus?"*

4.7 Reading Surrey's *"Love that doth reign and live within my thought"*

4.8 Let us Sum up

4.9 Further Reading

4.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

4.11 Possible Questions

4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- identify the established sonnet conventions and their variations
- describe the life and works of Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard
- explain the various important aspects of the poem "The Appeal "And wilt thou leave me thus?"
- discuss the poem A Praise of his Love "Give place ye lovers"
- appreciate both Wyatt and Surrey as the two most significant sonneteers in English

4.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with two sonnets written by Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) and Henry Howard, earl of Surrey (1517-47) who had been the forerunners of the sonnet tradition in English. You will learn that Wyatt's

lyrics have been greatly valued by the later ages. Wyatt's love poems, express the laments of the unrequited or deserted lover rather than the joys of mutuality like one can find in most 16th century love poetry. His sonnets introduce many of the topics that became so popular in the Elizabethan sonnet: sexual love as a hunt, the lover as a ship running aground on the rocks etc. Technically, Wyatt is important for the musical quality of his lyrics, an example of which is "My lute, awake". The name of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey is regularly coupled with that of Wyatt. He too was an exponent of sonnet writing in English. His love poems looked more conventional, stiff and imitative compared with Wyatt's freedom and emotional power. But, he has the enormous historical importance of having introduced blank verse into English. An attempt has been made in this unit to read two poems written by Wyatt and Surrey respectively, and it is expected that from this unit you will get some ideas of sonnet writings in the 16th century.

4.3 THE SONNET TRADITION

The sonnet, a name derived from the Italian *sonnetto,* meaning song or a little sound, is a 14-line poetic form that developed near the close of the Middle Ages. Italian Giacomo da Lentino (1188–1240) and other members of the court of Frederick II (1194–1250) are known as the inventors of the form, and Provençal courtly love poetry was an important influence. The sonnet increased in popularity throughout Europe during the Renaissance. Many writers sought to model their verses upon those of another Italian, Francesco Petrarch (1304–74), who created what is known as the Petrarchan sonnet. A sonnet is typified by three distinct forms, the Italian form being the most common. Developed from the Sicilian *strambotto* (meaning a Sicilian peasant song), this verse form consists of two quatrains and two tercets. In the Italian sonnet, the octave develops one thought, and the sestet grows out of the octave's thought, varying and completing it as if the sestet were a response to the octave, with a possible change in point of view. The usual rhyme scheme is *abba abba* (the octave) and *cde cde* (the sestet). The octave may be known as two quatrains if printed in quatrains, and the sestet may be known as two tercets.

This poetic form of the sonnet originated in Italy and literary historians named Giacomo da Lentini as the first Italian sonneteer. But, this kind of poetry flourished in the 13th century in the hands of Italian poets like Guittone d'Arezzo, Dante Alighieri, Guido Cavalcanti and so on. The most prominent name associated with the early Italian sonnet was of course Petrarch, by whose name the Italian sonnet later came to be identified. According to some scholars, the Occitan (the Provencal language) word *sonet* meaning 'a little song' is also at the root of the word 'sonnet'. In Italian (Petrarchan) sonnets, the fourteen lines were divided into one 'octave' (two quatrains) and one 'sestet' (two tercets). The usual rhyme scheme in Petrarchan sonnet was *a-b-b-a, a-b-b-a* for the octave and *c-d-e-c-d-e* or *c-d-c-c-d-c* for the sestet.

In English literature, it was Sir Thomas Wyatt who pioneered sonnet writing, followed by Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey in the 16th century. They were the followers of the Petrarchan convention of sonnet writing; but the latter brought some modifications to the Petrarchan model by introducing a different structural pattern of three quatrains and one couplet. Their sonnets were later included in Richard Tottel's *Songes and Sonnetts* (1557). Some other sonneteers who contributed to the development of the early English sonnets were Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, Fulke Greville and William Drummond of Hawthornden. However, the English sonnet was given a more solid footing by Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser. Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (first published in 1591) and Spenser's *The Amoretti* (1595) can be termed as two landmarks in the history of the English sonnet. Then there was Shakespeare, the undisputed master of the English sonnet, whose 154 sonnets established the English (Elizabethan) sonnet convention as a distinguished literary genre.

The English sonnet form, known as Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet form, consisted of three quatrains and one couplet, a pattern initiated by Surrey and brought into perfection by Shakespeare. It was usual in the English sonnet to compose each line in iambic pentameter, though there were also some notable exceptions to this rule. For example, the first sonnet in *Astrophel and Stella* was in iambic hexameter. The usual rhyme scheme

of the English sonnet was *a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g.* Edmund Spenser, of course, enriched the English sonnet form by introducing some variations. He initiated a rhyme scheme *abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee* with the quatrains connected by the interlocking rhyme scheme. His variety of sonnet is known as Spenserian sonnet.

The Petrarchan model was revived into the English sonnet by John Milton in the 17th century. Apart from him, John Donne and George Herbert, also wrote sonnets following both Petrarchan and Shakespearean rhyme schemes, while occasionally allowing variations to them. The Restoration period was a bleak period for the English sonnet, because sonnet became almost non-existent now in English literature until William Wordsworth brought it back during the period of the Romantic revival. Wordsworth as a sonneteer was a follower of Milton. Other Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley also contributed greatly to the sonnet writing. Among the 19th century English poets, some remarkable names flourishing in the field of sonnet were Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins. By this time, two other forms of sonnet, namely **curtal sonnet** (containing 10½ lines) and **caudate sonnet** (containing 24 lines), came into being. Now, thematically and formally, a great flexibility came to the sonnet writing. Among the 20th century English and American poets who had a knack for writing sonnets, some prominent names were Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, E. E. Cummings, William Butler Yeats, Wilfred Owen, W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill etc. They carried out new experiments into sonnet writing by including half-rhymed, unrhymed and even unmetrical poetic compositions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Who introduced the term sonnet?

Q 2: What is the pattern of the Petrarchan sonnet?

Q 3: Outline the development of the English sonnet.

Q 4: What is the pattern of English sonnet?

4.4 THOMAS WYATT: THE POET



Source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) was a 16th century English poet who is credited with introducing the sonnet into English. He was born at Allington Castle, near Maidstone in Kent, though his family was originally from Yorkshire. His father, Henry Wyatt, had been one of Henry VII's Privy Councillors, and remained a trusted adviser when Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509. In his turn, Thomas Wyatt followed his father to court after receiving his education at St. John's College, Cambridge. None of Wyatt's poems was published during his lifetime—the first book to feature his verse, *Tottel's Miscellany* of 1557, was printed a full fifteen years after his death.

Wyatt's professed object was to experiment with the English tongue, to civilise it, to raise its powers to those of its neighbours. A significant amount of his literary output consists of translations and imitations of sonnets by the Italian poet Petrarch, he also wrote sonnets of his own. He took subject matter from Petrarch's sonnets, but his rhyme schemes make a significant departure. Petrarch's sonnets consist of an Octave rhyming *abba abba*, followed, after a turn (volta) in the sense, by a sestet with various rhyme schemes. Wyatt employs the Petrarchan octave, but his most common sestet scheme is *cddc ee*. This marks the beginnings of an exclusively "English" contribution to sonnet structure—that is three quatrains and a closing couplet. 15 years after his death, the printer Richard Tottel included 97 poems attributed to Wyatt among the 271 poems in the famous *Totell's Miscellany Songs and Sonnets*.

While Wyatt's poetry reflects classical and Italian models, he also admired the works of Chaucer, and his vocabulary reflects Chaucer's. Many of his poems deal with the trials of romantic love and the devotion of the suitor to an unavailable or cruel mistress. His other poems are scathing, satirical indictments of the hypocrisies and pandering of the ambitious

courtiers to advance at the Tudor court. Thus, Wyatt was one of the earliest poets of the English Renaissance. He was responsible for many innovations in English poetry and, alongside Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, introduced the sonnet from Italy into England. His lyrics show tenderness of feeling and purity of diction. He is one of the originators of the convention in love poetry according to which the mistress is painted as hard-hearted and cruel.

Critical opinions of his work have varied widely. Thomas Warton, the 18th century critic, considered Wyatt "confessedly an inferior" to his contemporary Henry Howard, and that Wyatt's "genius was of the moral and didactic species and be deemed the first polished English satirist." The 20th century saw an awakening in his popularity and a surge in critical attention. C. S. Lewis called him "the father of the Drab Age", from what Lewis calls the "golden" age of the 16th century, while others see his love poetry, with its complex use of literary conceits as anticipating that of the Metaphysical Poets in the next century.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What does Wyatt's poetry reflect?

4.5 HENRY HOWARD, EARL OF SURREY: THE POET



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547) was born at Kenninghall Palace, Norfolk, England, to Lord Thomas Howard and Elizabeth Stafford Howard, the daughter of the Duke of Buckingham and a descendant of King Edward III of England. He was given the title Earl of Surrey in 1524 when his father became Duke of Norfolk. Two of his cousins, Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, were married to Henry VIII. Surrey's family connections provided him with a wealth of opportunities. He had a fiery temper, which landed him in trouble a number of times. He was imprisoned for brawling in 1537 and 1542, for rioting in 1543, and finally for high treason in 1546.

Surrey apparently began composing poetry while he was imprisoned at Windsor Castle in 1537. He remained, by necessity, an occasional poet, writing for the most part when he was not fulfilling some political office or following some military campaign. However, Surrey made a valuable contribution to English literature when he translated Books II and IV of the Roman poet Virgil's *The Aeneid*, an epic telling of the end of the Trojan War and the founding of Rome. In his translation, Surrey uses, for the first time in English, blank verse— unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter, or lines of 10 syllables alternating between unaccented and accented syllables. This poetic form has since come to seem like a natural part of the English language.

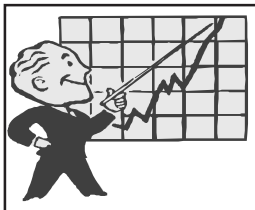
Another of Surrey's great innovations was the development of the English sonnet (sometimes called Shakespearean after William Shakespeare). The form of the sonnet that Surrey developed, in contrast with that of Wyatt, has three four-line units, known as quatrains, and a concluding two lines, the couplet. Surrey's rhyme scheme was abab cdcd efef gg. In this type of sonnet, the poet poses a problem in the three quatrains, with each quatrain dealing with a separate, though related, aspect of the problem. The poet then presents a conclusion in the couplet.



LET US KNOW

There remains confusion as to the exact number of poems written by Wyatt. There are several reasons for this uncertainty. As many of Wyatt's works were translations of the Italian poet Petrarch and others, some anthologists have chosen not to attribute these versions to Wyatt. Wyatt's canon is believed to be somewhere between 100 and 250 poems, not including his satires and psalms. A further complication to clearly establishing the breadth of Wyatt's work is the fact that he was not alone in translating some poems, and it becomes a challenge to attribute correctly, which version belongs to which poet. For instance, the Wyatt poem "The Long Love That In My Thought Doth Harbour" is a translation of Petrarch's Rime 140.

Wyatt's contemporary (sometimes described as equal, or even superior) Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, also penned a translation of a Petrarch poem, which he called 'Love That Doth Reign and Live Within My Thought'. Various critics have argued the respective literary merits and demerits of the three works. It is wrong to dismiss Wyatt's achievements in transforming Petrarch's initial works as mere translation. Wyatt uses the tradition and respect held by Petrarch's work to scaffold the new form of English poetry, and to catalogue the political and social tensions of his time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: What are Surrey's contributions to English poetry?

Q 7: Mention Surrey's great innovation as a sonneteer.

4.6 READING WYATT'S *THE APPEAL "AND WILT THOU LEAVE ME THUS?"*

The Text

And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay, for shame,
To save thee from the blame
Of all my grief and grame;
And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!

And wilt thou leave me thus,
That hath loved thee so long
In wealth and woe among?
And is thy heart so strong
As for to leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!

And wilt thou leave me thus,

That hath given thee my heart
Never for to depart,
Nother for pain nor smart;
And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!
And wilt thou leave me thus
And have no more pity
Of him that loveth thee?
Hélas, thy cruelty!
And wilt thou leave me thus?
Say nay, say nay!

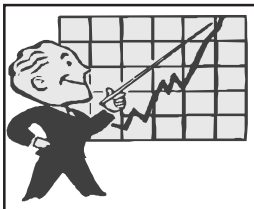
In the first verse, the narrator appeals to his lady love not to leave him in such a state of grief and sorrow. If she does, she will then be responsible for all his misery. He repeats his rhetorical question from the first line: "And wilt thou leave me thus?" The narrator then repeats his petition in **the second verse**, questioning as to whether she will abandon he who has loved her constantly, through times of profit and anguish. He then questions whether her heart has the strength and capacity to withstand the pressure of her terrible deed. Again, he pleads with her not to desert him. In **the third verse**, again beginning with his repeated request, he says that he gave his heart to her to be together, and not out of a desire to experience pain or embarrassment. His plea this time is for her not to leave him so broken and humiliated. By **the fourth verse,** the appeal is more plaintive. He asks for compassion, as he has loved her. By line 22, he bemoans her unkindness and brutality. The song concludes with the opening two lines being repeated.

The song is composed of four sestets (six-line verses), each with a refrain, 'Say nay! Say nay!', which reflects the tone of desolation and anguish. In the first stanza, the narrator's appeal for her to deny her rejection places the effect of the separation more to her disadvantage rather than his. The narrator implies that the lady will be held accountable for the distress she has caused him. Here Wyatt is reminding the audience that courtly

relationships are public entities in many ways, and the lady may damage her own reputation by dissolving this union. This implication reminds us of the tense social and patriarchal relationships within the Tudor court, wherein being out of favour could have fatal consequences.

The second stanza, deals with losses beyond those of the heart and mind. He reminds his ladylove of his loyalty, and how he has stood by her through good and bad times, which is expressed in the alliterative phrase 'wealth and woe'. Relationships were often conducted with fiscal implications, and money brought power and security to any match. Here, there is a suggestion that his support of her may have been more than as a lover, but also as a financial patron. These sorts of bonds would be difficult for a lady to give up unless there was a replacement for her former beau. There is a veiled warning in the question as to whether the lady's heart can survive the impact of such a callous action as abandoning the narrator. Her rejection could have consequences on her own emotional—and perhaps physical state. If she were to break his heart, she may, in turn, damage her own or even fall prey to the court. By the forth stanza, the narrator is filled with hopelessness at the lady's dismissal of him. He asserts that her cruelty has destroyed him.

The song concludes with the repetition of the opening two lines. Here Wyatt is using the structure of the song to add further social comment. By using a cyclical arrangement, there is an indication that the situation, along with the refrain and the despair, will be repeated. There is no real resolution offered, merely an indication that the lady will continue to break hearts and the narrator will continue to misplace his loyalty. There is much passion in the song, as indicated by the frequent use of exclamation marks, but no logic or conclusion.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: In what ways, does Wyatt portray social and patriarchal relationship in his sonnets?

Q 9: How is suffering expressed by Wyatt in his poems?

4.7 READING SURREY'S *"LOVE THAT DOTH REIGN AND LIVE WITHIN MY THOUGHT"*

The Text

Love that doth reign and live within my thought
And built his seat within my captive breast,
Clad in arms wherein with me he fought,
Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.
But she that taught me love and suffer pain,
My doubtful hope and eke my hot desire
With shamefaced look to shadow and refrain,
Her smiling grace converteth straight to ire.
And coward Love, then, to the heart apace
Taketh his flight, where he doth lurk and 'plain,
His purpose lost, and dare not show his face.
For my lord's guilt thus faultless bide I pain,

Yet from my lord shall not my foot remove,–
Sweet is the death that taketh end by love.

This is one of Surrey's characteristic sonnets, "Love that doth reign and live within my thought" adapted from Petrarch's Sonnetto in Vita 91. Surrey writes of love as a military drama. In the first quatrain, Love is characterised as a military figure who takes the field:

"Love that doth reign and live within my thought,
That built his seat within my captive breast;
Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought,
Oft in my face he doth his banner rest."

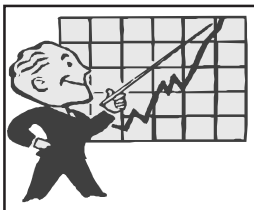
The Beloved's response to the narrator is presented in the second quatrain:

"But she, that taught me to love, and suffer pain;
My doubtful hope, and eke [also] my hot desire….."

In the couplet, the speaker enters the drama, stating his intention to die on the field of battle in the pursuit of his love: "Yet from my Lord shall not

my foot remove: Sweet is his death that takes his end by love." In addition to developing blank verse and the English sonnet, Surrey was also among the earliest English poets to struggle for smooth metrical patterns in his lines. The meter, or rhythm, of very old English poetry is accentual, meaning that each line contains a certain number of stressed syllables but can have any number of syllables. Later poets used a syllabic-accentual meter, meaning that each line contains the same number of syllables and the same number of accented syllables. A line of iambic pentameter, for instance, always contains 10 syllables, five of which are stressed.

Prior to Surrey, English poets only loosely followed syllable counts in their lines. Surrey, however, learned from the Italians "the structural value of regularity, of keeping exact iambs," and he worked at making his lines' rhythms metrically correct. His verse is, consequently, smoother than the verse of his predecessors, and after his death, poets followed his example. Dennis Keene, one of Surrey's editors observed that Surrey, "having achieved a revolution in the rhythm and vocabulary of poetry…determined the nature of poetic vocabulary for the following two hundred years."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10: How does Surrey portray the theme of love in the poem?

Q 11: What is Surrey's contribution to English metrical system?



4.8 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you must have learnt that Wyatt and Surrey were the first English poets to write poetry in the sonnet form that Shakespeare later used, and Surrey was the first English poet to write poetry in blank verse (which is also known as unrhymed iambic pentameter) in his translation of the second and fourth books of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Together, Wyatt and Surrey, due to their excellent translations of Petrarch's sonnets, are known as "Fathers of the English Sonnet." While Wyatt introduced the sonnet

into English, it was Surrey who gave them the rhyming meter, and the division into quatrains that now characterises the sonnets variously named as English, Elizabethan or Shakespearean sonnets. In both the poems, the narrators wails over the loss or rejection of their lady love out of intense emotional bereavement, which also refers to the complex social relationships.



4.9 FURTHER READING

Holton, Amanda. (Ed). (2011). *Tottel's Miscellany: Songs and Sonnets of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Others (English).* Penguin Publishing Group.

Web Resources:

http://www.gradesaver.com/collected-poems-of-sir-thomas-wyatt/study-guide/summary-and-wilt-thou-leave-me-thus https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Wyatt_(poet)



4.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Italian Giacomo da Lentino (1188–1240) and other members of the court of Frederick II (1194–1250) are known as the inventors of the form, and Provençal courtly love poetry was an important influence. The sonnet increased in popularity throughout Europe during the Renaissance.

Ans to Q No 2: In Italian (Petrarchan) sonnets, the fourteen lines were divided into one 'octave' (two quatrains) and one 'sestet' (two tercets). The usual rhyme scheme in Petrarchan sonnet was *a-b-b-a, a-b-b-a* for the octave and *c-d-e-c-d-e* or *c-d-c-c-d-c* for the sestet.

Ans to Q No 3: The sonnet was introduced in England by Thomas Wyatt and Earl of Surrey… …they brought some modifications to the Petrarchan model by introducing a different structural pattern… …the English sonnet became famous in the hands of Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser… …But, it was Shakespeare who established the English sonnet convention as a distinguished literary genre.

Ans to Q No 4: The English sonnet form consisted of three quatrains and one couplet… …the rhyme scheme of the English sonnet was *a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g…* …Spencer initiated another rhyme scheme *abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee* with the quatrains connected by the interlocking rhyme scheme.

Ans to Q No 5: Wyatt's poetry reflects classical and Italian models… …many of his poems deal with the trials of romantic love, and the devotion of the suitor to an unavailable or cruel mistress… …his other poems are scathing, satirical indictments of the hypocrisies and pandering of the ambitious courtiers to advance at the Tudor court.

Ans to Q No 6: Surrey translated Books II and IV of the Roman poet Virgil's *The Aeneid*… …in his translation he used blank verse— unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter, or lines of 10 syllables alternating between unaccented and accented syllables for the first time… …this poetic form became famous in the English language.

Ans to Q No 7: The form of the sonnet that Surrey developed, in contrast with that of Wyatt, has three four-line units, known as quatrains, and a concluding two lines, the couplet. Surrey's rhyme scheme was abab cdcd efef gg. The poet poses a problem in the three quatrains, with each quatrain dealing with a separate, though related, aspect of the problem. The poet then presents a conclusion in the couplet.

Ans to Q No 8: The lady has been held accountable for the distress she has caused the poet… … this reflects courtly relationships, and that the lady may damage her own reputation by dissolving her union with the man… …This is a reminder of the tense social and patriarchal relationships within the Tudor court.

Ans to Q No 9: Her rejection could have consequences on her own emotional—and perhaps physical state… …the narrator is filled with hopelessness at the lady's dismissal of him, as he asserts that her cruelty has destroyed him.

Ans to Q No 10: Surrey writes of love as a military drama. In the first quatrain, Love is characterised as a military figure who takes the field.

Ans to Q No 11: Surrey, learned from the Italians "the structural value of regularity, of keeping exact iambs," and he worked at making his lines' rhythms metrically correct. His verse is, consequently, smoother than the verse of his predecessors, and after his death, poets followed his example.



4.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss Wyatt and Surrey's contributions to English sonnets.

Q 2: What significance do Wyatt and Surrey retain in the history of English poetry?

Q 3: Explore the theme of betrayal in Wyatt's sonnets. Write with reference to at least three sonnets.

Q 4: What view of women does Wyatt illustrate in his work? Exemplify your ideas with reference to some of his important sonnets.

Q 5: Select a few sonnets to illustrate Wyatt's skill in using the form to portray the issues and concerns of his age.

Q 6: The theme of unrequited love is an important element in English sonnets. Comment with reference to Wyatt's sonnets.

Q 7: Surrey established a smooth metrical pattern through his lines. Discuss.

*** ***** ***

UNIT 5: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: SONNET 65 "SINCE BRASS, NOR STONE, NOR EARTH, NOR BOUNDLESS SEA" & SONNET 144 "TWO LOVES I HAVE OF COMFORT AND DESPAIR"

UNIT STRUCTURE:

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 William Shakespeare: The Poet

- 5.3.1 His Life
- 5.3.2 His Poetic Works

5.4 Reading the Sonnets

- 5.4.1 The Text of the Sonnets
- 5.4.2 Major Themes
- 5.4.3 Shakespeare's Poetic Style

5.5 Critical Reception of Shakespeare as a Poet

5.6 Let us Sum up

5.7 Further Reading

5.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

5.9 Possible Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explore the growth of the English sonnets as a particular poetic form during the Elizabethan period
- discuss Shakespeare's pivotal role in ushering in a new epoch in the history of the English sonnet
- examine the thematic concerns and stylistic qualities of the prescribed sonnets of Shakespeare
- gain a broader perception of Shakespeare's contributions to the English sonnet tradition

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the last unit of this course and it is based on two sonnets composed by Shakespeare. You know that the Sonnet is defined as a form of poetry consisting traditionally of fourteen lines with occasional exceptions to it. A kind of personal poetry expressing a single emotion or idea, the sonnet uses a fixed rhyme scheme and a distinct structure. It was none other than Shakespeare with whom we identify the tradition of the English sonnets. It is also because, Shakespeare perfected the sonnet form in England by introducing a distinctively different rhyme scheme from the Petrachan tradition introduced in England by Wyatt and Surrey. This unit is based on two important sonnets of Shakespeare, which convey a very complex sense of difficulty faced by lovers. The selection of these two sonnets in this unit is made in order to make you learn how Shakespeare conceived the idea of love. By the time you finish reading the unit, you will not only understand the themes of these two sonnets, but will also get an opportunity to examine the art of Shakespeare as a poet of the Elizabethan period.

5.3 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: LIFE AND WORKS

5.3.2 His Poetic Works

In this section, we shall discuss briefly the life history of Shakespeare and some of his famous works.



Source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org

William Shakespeare, the most renowned playwright of England, was born at Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England. The exact date of his birth is not known, but the biographers said that he had been baptised on 26 April 1564. He was the son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. Many of his biographers speculated that William

Shakespeare had received his education at the King's New School at Stratford. In November 1582, he got married to Anne Hathaway, a lady eight years older than him, and in course of time, he became the father of three children –Susanna, Hamnet and Judith.

Nothing concrete is known about Shakespeare during the period from 1585 to 1592, and though some biographers offered many invented stories pertaining to this part of his life, these seven years were in fact 'lost years' in the life of Shakespeare. There were, of course, some evidences to suggest that during this period, Shakespeare established himself in the career of an actor and playwright on the London stage. He also came into partnership with some other players to own a playing company called the 'Lord Chamberlain's Men', which, from 1594, became the only company to stage Shakespeare's plays. This leading playing company of London was later renamed 'King's Men'. The part owners of this company gave birth to their own theatre called 'Globe' in 1599. In 1608, they also took over Blackfriars indoor theatre, an important theatre in London at that time.

Most of the known literary works of Shakespeare were supposed to be written between 1589 and 1613. He wrote about 38 plays, but the exact dates of their composition are still in the dark. Some of Shakespeare's later plays were written in collaboration with some other dramatist, probably John Fletcher. Some historians said that Shakespeare had written two more plays, namely *Love's Labour's Won* and *The History of Cardenio*, which were subsequently lost. There were eleven other plays, which were occasionally treated as Shakespeare's, but there has been no significant evidence to authenticate this claim.

From 1594, some of Shakespeare's plays started appearing in print in quarto editions. In 1623, after Shakespeare's death, two of his friends from 'King's Men', John Heminges and Henry Condell, published the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays. This edition included 36 of his plays, excluding *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and

Pericles, Prince of Tyre, which were recognised as Shakespeare's only later.

Shakespeare breathed his last at Stratford-upon-Avon on 23 April 1616 at the age of 52. His creative height earned him the epithet of the 'Bard of Avon'.

5.3.2 His Poetic Works

Though there is no dearth of poetry in Shakespeare's plays, he also applied his creativity in producing some non-dramatic poetic creations in addition to his plays. In between 1593-94, Shakespeare published two poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. It was a time when plague occurred in London, and its consequence was the closure of the theatres. These two were long narrative poems dealing with some erotic subjects. The most remarkable of his non-dramatic poetic works, his 154 sonnet sequence, was published by Thomas Thorpe in 1609 in a quarto entitled *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS: Never before imprinted* (with notable errors of punctuation marks in the title). Like his plays, it was not possible to know for certain the exact dates of composition of his sonnets too; it might be that the act of composing sonnets spread over his entire literary career. However, there are evidences to show that many of his sonnets were written during the 1590s, and by 1598, some of them were privately circulated among his friends; it is possible that he wrote the sonnets targeting private readership. In 1599, a book titled *The Passionate Pilgrim* appeared in print and two of Shakespeare's sonnets, no. 138 and 144 first saw the light in this book. The book bore Shakespeare's name, but probably it was published without his permission. Another poem of Shakespeare, titled *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, was included in Robert Chester's book *Love's Martyr* published in 1601. You will note that the 1609 edition of Shakespeare's sonnets also included a narrative poem *A Lover's Complaint*, which contained 47 seven-line stanzas.

To speak of the sonnets, scholars are not sure whether Shakespeare had written the sonnets in the same order as they were presented in the 1609-edition. However, they preferred to divide them into two broader groups. The first group consists of sonnets 1 to 126, addressed to a young friend of the poet known as the Fair Youth. Sonnets 127 to 152, which form the second group, were addressed to a woman of uncertain identity, who is often referred to as the Dark Lady. The last two in the sequence, sonnets 153 and 154, treating the power and might of Cupid, the Greek god of love, are placed in a separate category.

Again, uncertainty surrounds the identities of the persons who figured in the sonnets; there is even a question mark on whether they were historical individuals or imaginary figures. Some scholars also raised questions on whether the ‘I’ in the sonnets was the representation of the poet himself. The dedication page in the 1609 edition, opened more doors for speculations in this respect. The book was dedicated to some mysterious Mr. W.H., who was referred to as the ‘only begetter of these ensuing sonnets’, the word ‘begetter’ adding to the confusions. At the foot of the dedication page, there were the initials ‘T.T., which might mean Thomas Thorpe, the publisher. Some scholars believed that this Mr. W.H. was the Fair Youth addressed to in many of Shakespeare’s sonnets, though according to some others, Mr. W.H. was a different person. The identity of Mr. W.H. could not be ascertained and there were many real life contenders, like William Herbert (the Earl of Pembroke), Henry Wriothesley (the Earl of Southampton), William Hall (a printer), Sir William Harvey, (Southampton’s stepfather), William Haughton (a contemporary dramatist), William Hart (Shakespeare’s nephew), William Hatcliffe of Lincolnshire, William Hughes (an actor) etc.

According to Bertrand Russell, Don Foster and Jonathan Bate, ‘Mr. W.H.’ was the outcome of a simple printing error in Shakespeare’s initials, ‘W.S.’ or ‘W. Sh’. While many scholars

believed that the word 'begetter' in the dedication might mean 'inspirer' (some friend or patron of Shakespeare), Bate had the opinion that it meant 'writer' (Shakespeare himself). German scholar D. Barnstorff also believed that 'W.H.' stood for 'William (Shakespeare) Himself'. On the other hand, Colin Burrow suggested that 'W.H.' meant 'Who He', not someone specific, purposefully formulated by the publisher to add to the mystery and ambiguity about the sonnets. Now, the Fair Youth might be William Herbert (the Earl of Pembroke), Henry Wriothesley (the Earl of Southampton), William Hughes or an unknown commoner. Scholars also tried to identify the Dark Lady with historical personages like Mary Fitton, Emilia Lanier etc. In some of the sonnets (sonnets 78–86), there were references to a Rival Poet, and his identity was also as mysterious as that of the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady. It was suggested that he might be Christopher Marlowe, George Chapman, Robert Greene or some other contemporary poet.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What are the three categories of Shakespeare's sonnets?

5.4 READING THE SONNETS

5.4.1 The Text of the Sonnets

Sonnet 65: "Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea"

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,

When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
O fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time’s best jewel from Time’s chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Sonnet 144: “Two Loves I have of Comfort and Despair”

I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman colour’d ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
And whether that my angel be turn’d fiend
Suspect I may, but not directly tell;
But being both from me, both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another’s hell:
Yet this shall I ne’er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

5.4.2 Major Themes

Sonnet 65: “Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea”

Love is the central theme of Shakespeare’s sonnets as was the case with the Italian as well as the pre-Shakespearean English sonnets. However, it was not the sole thematic concern for Shakespeare to deal with. In the process of exploring different kinds of love in his sonnets, Shakespeare took the opportunity to treat

some other important themes like beauty, mortality, the role of time as destroyer, the power of art etc. In the first group of sonnets, from sonnet 1 to 126, Shakespeare expressed his deep love for the unnamed Fair Youth, adored his beauty and articulated a feeling, which some critics liked to equate with homosexual desire, while for some others it was a revelation of a kind of platonic love. In the first 17 sonnets of this group, described by some critics as 'procreation sonnets', the poet urged the Fair Youth to marry and beget children with the intent to immortalise his beauty by passing it to his progeny. In the other sonnets of this group, his love for the young man led him to take a serious note of solitude, death and transience of life. Shakespeare also felt offended with the young man for preferring the Rival Poet to him, for betraying him through his yielding to the seduction by his mistress, the so-called Dark Lady who was central to the second group of sonnets, and for using his beauty to cover up his immoral behaviour. But, the poet continued with love and admiration for his friend. Some critics called the Fair Youth Shakespeare's alter ego.

Sonnet 65 belongs to this first group of sonnets, which deal with Shakespeare's love for the young man. This sonnet shows how the speaker valued the love he bore in mind for his friend the young man as well as the beauty of that man. But, in order to put emphasis on his love, and on his friend's beauty, Shakespeare elaborately dealt with the theme of the ravaging power of time. The speaker lamented that the passage of time has a devastating effect on love and life. Time is so powerful that it puts to decay everything; it does not spare even those things that appear to be strong—imperishable and permanent—like brass, stone, earth and boundless sea. The rocks and gates made of iron, which are supposed to be great and formidable, are indeed not strong enough to resist the time-inflicted mortality. In such a situation, the speaker felt depressed to think that it is quite impossible for a very fragile thing like beauty, whose strength is comparable only to that of a

flower, to withstand the destructive force of time. The battering storm of time thrusts destructive assault on all the things that embody beauty in life, like the sweet breath of summer. The speaker is scared to think that though the rare beauty of his friend was the best gift of time, it also would not be able to escape the ravaging hand of time. Unfortunately, there is no strong hand that can hold back the swift movement of time or prevent it from destroying beauty. By causing beauty to fade, time causes harm to love.

But, towards the end of the poem, Shakespeare brought in another theme, that of the immortality of art, or supremacy of art over time. Shakespeare used this theme also to highlight the significance of the themes of love and beauty again. He said that art (poetry) is one thing about mankind, which may be able to resist the all-powerful time. Art is immortal and with art, the war against mortality can be fought successfully. The speaker hoped to create a miracle with his pen:”O, none, unless this miracle have might, / That in black ink my love may still shine bright.”

Through his verse, he wanted to keep his love continually and permanently shining in spite of the presence of all-destroying time. It was his belief that his poetry would remain unaffected by the ceaseless passage of time, and therefore, beauty, though apparently fragile, could defeat time through poetry. In this way, we can see that by glorifying art, the speaker glorified love and beauty, because in his attempt to earn victory over time through verses (sonnets) lay his deep yearning to achieve immortality for love and beauty.

Sonnet 144: “Two Loves I have of Comfort and Despair”

The theme of love continues to dominate the poetic design in the second group of sonnets from sonnet 127 to 152; but this time the primary emphasis is on the usual man-woman love. In these sonnets, the speaker expressed his extra-marital love for a married lady of dark complexion. In his treatment of the theme of love in these sonnets, Shakespeare went away from the centuries

old tradition of Petrarchan love sonnets, which also influenced the English sonneteers before him as well as many of his contemporaries. Contrary to the women of the traditional sonnets who were adored for their angelic demeanour, virginity and constancy, Shakespeare's Dark Lady was crude, lascivious and faithless. According to some critics, by expressing overtly sexual love for the Dark Lady in this group of sonnets (particularly in sonnet 151 which appeared to be quite bawdy), Shakespeare came away from the spiritual love expressed for the Fair Youth in the first group of sonnets. Another sonnet (sonnet 129) reveals the poet's consciousness of sin with regards to lust and love. The Dark Lady proved to be treacherous to the poet, particularly by seducing his friend, and Shakespeare condemned this act in unambiguous terms. In course of time, the love affair between the poet and the lady took a triangular shape with the Fair Youth at the third angle, and this caused despair in the poet's mind, which he ventilated in clear words. In this way, his exploration of love was not confined to a linear, one-dimensional form.

Usually known as the 'key sonnet', sonnet 144 has a sombre tone. Love being the central theme in this sonnet too, it expresses the speaker's agony that was consequent upon his being caught in the sordid love triangle. It fully reveals the speaker's interior conflict caused by his being torn between two objects of love; one (the Fair Youth, whom he called better angel) gave him comfort, while the other (the Dark Lady, who was referred to as worse spirit) caused him despair. The female bad angel, by making the male better angel yield to her temptation, took him away from the speaker, and this shocking development in this love triangle brought the speaker to a hellish state of mental anguish: "To win me soon to hell, my female evil/Tempteth my better angel from my side". He was upset because both his young friend and his mistress had discarded him and they had come closer to each other. So, it was the betrayal and faithlessness in love and friendship that the speaker was brooding over.

There is another perspective to view this point. The inner conflict of the poet caused by the presence of both good angel and bad angel in his inner self was the conflict between the ideal and the real, though both were potent for him. He was troubled with the thought that his inner world of beauty collided with the utterly confused external life of activity, against which he was powerless. Like Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus,* the speaker has to divide his loyalties between both good and evil angels, or in other words, between virtues and vices or between the desired and the attained.

In this sonnet, the poet deals with an important theme of the danger of sexual love. The Dark Lady wooed the Fair Youth by arousing in him sexual desire, which the young man could not resist, and in this process, both of them proved their faithlessness to the speaker. By robbing the young man of his purity by subjugating him to her sexual pride, the lady of dark complexion would corrupt the saintly young man’s mind and turn him into a devil. The speaker was not sure whether his friend would really turn into an evil spirit under the evil influence of his mistress, but he suspected so. He guessed that his angelic friend indulged in a sexual act with the bad angel, the Dark Lady. The speaker would not know it for certain, but he had the doubt about it. The speaker held the notion that their copulation would lead to the young man’s suffering from venereal disease, the ultimate curse of unscrupulous sexual acts (which was rampant in the contemporary Tudor society), because he believed that, his amoral mistress was promiscuous.

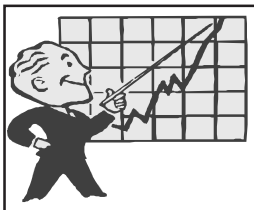


LET US KNOW

Shakespeare adopted different perspectives to view love – a breaking away from the tradition. He loved both the young man and the dark complexioned lady, and both left a very significant impact on his life. But, his love for the young man was basically spiritual; though he might have homosexual relation with him,

at certain level it crossed the bound of mere physicality. But, his love for the mistress was based on erotic desire only. Both kinds of love were essential for the poet, but he esteemed his relation with the young man much above that with his mistress, which meant, he preferred spiritual need to the physical need and found depressing the loss of spirituality to the earthly desires.

Shakespeare, in this and many other sonnets, depicted the woman as a very strong individual, not by virtue of her love, but of her will power. The speaker was aware of the weaknesses in the character of his friend, who would allow the lady to corrupt him; but he held his mistress solely responsible for the seemingly unscrupulous affair between his friend and her. Against the despairing powerlessness of the speaker against his lamentable losses, the woman here was worryingly powerful, her power gaining sustenance from her will.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: What are the major themes of Sonnet 65?

Q 3: Mention the main themes of Sonnet 144? Do you think that the sonnet throws light on Shakespeare's spiritual anguish?

5.4.3 Shakespeare's Poetic Style

Instead of being lost in the traditional sonnet style based on the Petrarchan model, Shakespeare rather gave a distinct identity to the English sonnet style. Though the sonnet structure of three quatrains and one couplet had been introduced to the English sonnet much before Shakespeare, it was Shakespeare who raised it to a completeness. Shakespeare used in almost all his sonnets iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg.* Of course, in sonnets 99, 126, and 145 he did some other experiments. In sonnet 99, he used fifteen lines instead of fourteen, in sonnet 126 there

were six couplets in addition to two blank lines marked with italic brackets, in sonnet 145 Shakespeare also used iambic tetrameters. The poet came away from the normal rhyme scheme of the conventional Elizabethan sonnet in sonnet 29 too, in which he replaced 'f' with 'b' by repeating it, and therefore, the rhyme scheme became *abab cdcd ebeb gg.* The critics are not sure about whether this variation was intentional or it resulted from some casually committed error.

Usually a sonnet is a compact form of argument, and Shakespeare took this argumentative approach of sonnet to a high level of artistry. In Petrarchan sonnet, the octave brings about the 'proposition', which may be elaboration of some problem. Then, the sestet leads to a 'resolution' in the form of a revelation or epiphany on the part of the poet. The first line of the sestet (the ninth line of the poem) creates the 'volta' or 'turn', which marks the sudden shift from the proposition to the resolution, or the change in the poem's mood, tone or attitude. In the typical Elizabethan sonnets, also, the proposition part belongs to the first two quatrains, and the 'volta' comes in the beginning of the third quatrain (the ninth line of the poem).

Shakespeare added some modifications to this design. In the three coordinate quatrains in his sonnet, there is a well-balanced yet swift development of the proposition, while the sharp thematic 'volta' comes in the couplet, which summarises the theme, or leads to some unexpected revelation, sometimes in the level of an epigram. He used the three quatrains to develop the same idea, sometimes in a repetitive manner, to accentuate it. For example, in sonnet 65, the three quatrains deal with the unstoppable ravages of time and the speaker's worry about how to protect the beauty of his friend from the destructive hand of time. He put all the arguments in these three quatrains in the unique way of putting questions; but his questions are by no means interrogative, they are the answers in themselves. In the couplet, the poet unexpectedly brought about the resolution that the beauty of his friend could be immortalised

through his verses. The thought expressed in the three quatrains is juxtaposed with the new realisation in the couplet. In sonnet 144, the three quatrains describe the speaker's worry about the probable damaging effect of the unscrupulous love affair between the young man and the dark-complexioned lady on the young man. Then in the couplet, there is a sudden change in tone, from the supposition about the spiritual harm done to the young man by his sexual relation with the speaker's mistress to the concrete possibility of the physical harm in the form of venereal disease.



LET US KNOW

Sonnet being a lyrical composition, Shakespeare added dramatic elements to it. The lyrical quality in his sonnets lies in their revelation of the finer feelings of the poet's heart with a musical splendour. The dramatic about the sonnets is the poet's observation of the world around him and presentation of the conflicts in his soul. He adopted unsurpassable felicity in the use of his diction. A kind of simplicity and lucidity that can be attributed to Shakespeare alone marks his sonnets. He also excelled in using vivid metaphors as well as various kinds of conceits. The structure of Shakespeare's sonnet is compact and close-knit.

There is a variety of tones Shakespeare used in various sonnets. Sometimes, the tone is humorous, sometimes it is sordid. In sonnet 65, for example, the tone at the beginning is melancholic, which gradually took the shape of distress and grief, owing to the speaker's sense of utter helplessness in front of the ruthless movement of time. The intensity of this feeling of grief suited the lyrical approach of this poem. But, in the couplet, the poet dramatically transformed the feeling of grief into a confirmation of some hope for victory against time through poetry. Similarly, a tone of despair occupied the entire sonnet 144. The dramatic quality of sonnet 65 is enhanced by introduction of a number of contrasts in

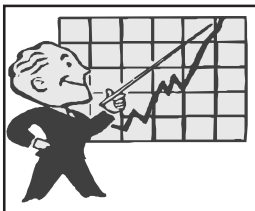
it. Here, soft and beautiful things are contrasted with hard things like brass, stone, rocks, gates of steel etc., the changeability and mortality caused by the passage of time is contrasted with immortality of poetry, the blackness of the ink is contrasted with the brightness of the love it will preserve. The questioning method in which the idea was allowed to develop in the poem also produces a dramatic effect.

Imagery is another important stylistic feature in Shakespeare's sonnets. It emanates from a wide range of areas pertaining to the natural world, the human life and the world of the abstract. Pictorial quality is seen in its remarkable height in sonnet 65. To illustrate the destructive power of time, Shakespeare presented seemingly invulnerable and permanent natural objects like brass, stone, earth, iron and sea. The graphic expressions in this poem, like 'wreckful siege', 'battering days', 'impregnable', 'gates of steel', 'Time's best jewel', 'Time's chest' etc. produce a visual effect in the minds of the readers. The picture in which beauty is shown as 'holding a plea' echoes legal parlance. Shakespeare's metaphorical language is exemplified by the use of the word 'rage' to indicate the power of 'sad mortality'. The idea of summer's honey breath attempting to resist the 'wreckful siege' of time is a vivid extended metaphor, in which the summer symbolises life itself. Another metaphor is the use of the expression 'Time's best jewel' to mean the poet's friend. Some other metaphorical expressions are 'his swift foot' and 'his spoil of beauty'. Again, in a figurative way, the flower is used to emphasise the delicacy and fragility of beauty as well as the transience of life. In this sonnet, Shakespeare also used personification; he personified beauty, summer and time, enhancing the dramatic effect and increasing the richness of the poem.

Imagery is used in sonnet 144 too. The poet spoke of two objects of his love; and he described one of them as 'a man right fair', while the other was referred to as a woman 'colour'd ill, making the words 'fair' and 'ill' serve double purposes of bearing both physical and spiritual meanings. However, in this sonnet, Shakespeare's

imagery is mainly abstract and suggestive. The poet compared his male and female lovers with 'better angel' and 'worse angel' respectively. The expressions like hell, devil, fiend etc. stand for the evil side of human life. The expression 'one angel in another's hell' is also suggestive of sexual act. The word 'fire' in the last line of the sonnet also specifically indicates venereal disease.

Some critics opined that certain sonnets of Shakespeare have parallel with the corresponding (or sometimes adjacent) Penitential Psalms. For example, the reference to earth, sea, and rage, summer in sonnet 65 echoes the reference to earth, sea, 'raging crowns the year with his goodness' in the corresponding Psalm. Similarly, the reference to the spirit in Psalm no. 43 can be linked with the reference to the good and evil spirit, apart from its suggestive expression of 'one angel in another's hell' in sonnet 144, though the sexual innuendo in this expression was absent from the Psalm.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What are the main stylistic qualities in Shakespeare's sonnets?

Q 5: What do you mean by the term 'Volta'?

Q 6: Comment on Shakespeare's use of Imagery in Sonnet 65.

5.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF SHAKESPEARE AS A POET

Shakespeare's sonnets earned great acclaim from critics for the intensity and seriousness as well as the structural beauty with which he handled the subjects of love, sexual passion, procreation, death, and time. In 1598, Francis Meres, a cleric and author, termed these sonnets as '*sugred* (sugared, meaning sweet) *Sonnets among his private friends*'. Great dramatist and poet Dryden applauded Shakespeare's poetry for the presence of *'the largest and most comprehensive soul'* among *'all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets'.* He found picture in every word of Shakespeare's

poetry. William Wordsworth also expressed high opinion of Shakespeare's sonnets by saying that *"Shakespeare unlocked his heart"* in his sonnets. But, at the same time, he also did not hesitate to point out the weaknesses in them; he was particularly critical of the second group of sonnets, beginning with sonnet 127, which were addressed to the Dark Lady. Wordsworth wrote:

"These sonnets, beginning at 127, to his Mistress, are worse than a puzzle-peg. They are abominably harsh, obscure & worthless. The others are for the most part much better, have many fine lines, very fine lines & passages. They are also in many places warm with passion. Their chief faults, and heavy ones they are, are sameness, tediousness, quaintness, & elaborate obscurity." Samuel Taylor Coleridge found in Shakespeare's sonnets "boundless fertility and laboured condensation of thought, with perfection of sweetness in rhythm and metre."

Some critics believed that Shakespeare's sonnets paved the way for a new breed of 'modern' love poetry in English. Though during the 18th century, Shakespeare's natural genius was highly recognised, and his name got linked with the title of the 'national poet' of England, there was a relative decline in the popularity of his sonnets. In the 19th century, of course, the reputation of his sonnets was on a gradual rise. Shakespeare's sonnets were 'double-shotted with thought', critic J. A. Noble remarked that the term 'intellectualised emotion' would be more appropriate as regards Shakespeare's sonnets.

Shakespeare could arouse among the modernist poets new curiosity. His imagery became a subject of serious study for accomplished poets like T. S. Eliot, G. Wilson Knight and the 'New Critics'. In the late 1930s, John Crowe Ransom criticised Shakespeare for not being successful in his job of writing sonnets, as he believed that Shakespeare was not fit for amateurs." His major objection to Shakespeare's sonnets was their seeming 'incoherence'. According to him, half of Shakespeare's sonnets were 'tolerably workmanlike', but the rest were 'seriously defective'. But, according to Russell Fraser,

"Singular in its concern with last things, Shakespeare's sonnet is true to the rest of them in the way its subject is invested. *He* doesn't believe in the kernel of truth at the center and doesn't strip away the husk but adds layer on layer. His multilayered performances don't preclude meaning, though; and the sonnets—never mind how much trouble they give — aren't conundrums. But Shakespeare's meaning is comprehensive like the life his poems describe."

Gertrude Garages, on the other hand, said that critics of Shakespeare's sonnets conceived opposite views on whether they were autobiographical or dramatic and vicarious. She did not herself perceive the sonnets as autobiographical in ordinary sense. According to her, they were autobiographical in a different sense – they revealed the inner feelings coming out of the poet's soul.

This way, you must have already noticed that Shakespeare was taken into great consideration in the subsequent periods. However, new studies done on Shakespeare's sonnets in modern times, added more impetus to the discussion and reception of Shakespeare as a significant poet of the English canon.



5.6 LET US SUM UP

By now, you must have learnt that Shakespeare had the pivotal role in establishing the English or Elizabethan sonnet convention as he brought a variety to sonnet-writing by not only developing new formal style, but also introducing wider perspectives to the treatment of the traditional love-theme in sonnet, besides encompassing some other serious issues of life like beauty, time, poetry etc. You have found that the sonnet 65 is addressed to the Fair Youth, and here, the poet expressed profound love for him and side by side with it, he dealt with the theme of the destructive power of time. However, this feeling of despair was transformed into an affirmative assertion of hope that his poetry can immortalise his love for his friend by defeating time. In a more depressing tone, Shakespeare, in sonnet 144, spoke about the betrayal and faithlessness of both his young friend and his mistress,

whom he referred to as good angel and bad angel respectively. The poet's favouring his friend over his mistress indicates his preferring spiritual love to sexual love. However, at a deeper level of interpretation, the poet suggested an inner conflict within himself between his inner ideal world and the external world of reality. The poet also laid stress on the woman's strength of will in this sonnet. Shakespeare's poetic style perfectly matched the thematic directions of his sonnets. His sonnets are quite rich in vivid and wide-ranged imagery. He brought the use of metaphor, conceit, personification etc. to a level of great artistry. So, we can rightly say that Shakespeare furthered the Elizabethan love poetry to an extreme extent of splendour by adding new dimensions to it. His sonnets opened up new vistas as regards sensibility and art.



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5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Shakespeare's 154 sonnets are classified into three groups… …sonnets from 1 to 126 deals with his love for his friend

the Fair Youth... …sonnets from 127 to 152 are addressed to his mistress the Dark Lady… …the remaining two sonnets are about the love-god Cupid.

Ans to Q No 2: One major theme of sonnet 65 is the poet's profound love for the Fair Youth… …then, he also highlights the theme of the power of time, which caused everything in the world to decay… …but finally, the poet asserts that time's destructive movement can be made ineffective with the power of poetry.

Ans to Q No 3 : The poet's assertion of the supremacy of spiritual love over sexual love… …he has also treated the themes of betrayal and faithlessness in love and friendship as well as the danger of sexual love in the form of venereal disease… …yes, the poem also throws light on the poet's spiritual anguish caused by the conflict of his internal and external worlds, and his recognition of the strength of will in women.

Ans to Q No 4: Shakespeare perfected the sonnet form into three quatrains and one couplet… …his unique design, as regards the 'volta', brought the argumentative nature of sonnet to a different level… …other stylistic qualities include – lyrical quality, the felicity of his words, the simplicity in language, the variety of tone, the use of contrasts, metaphors and conceits… …use of vivid imagery is another noteworthy feature of Shakespeare's sonnet.

Ans to Q No 5: The first line of the sestet creates the 'volta' or 'turn'… …it marks a sudden change in the poem's mood, tone or attitude… … in the typical Elizabethan sonnets the volta comes in the beginning of the third quatrain… …but Shakespeare added some modifications… …the 'volta' comes in the concluding couplet.

Ans to Q No 6: To illustrate the destructive power of time, Shakespeare presented seemingly invulnerable and permanent natural objects like brass, stone, earth, iron and sea. The graphic expressions in this poem, like 'wreckful siege', 'battering days', 'impregnable', 'gates of steel', 'Time's best jewel', 'Time's chest' etc. produce a visual effect in the minds of the readers.



5.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss in detail Shakespeare’s role as a sonneteer in the Elizabethan period.

Q 2: What, according to you, are the similarities and differences between the English and Italian sonnets?

Q 3: Critically examine Shakespeare’s treatment of the theme of love with special reference to the prescribed sonnets.

Q 4: Discuss with examples from Sonnet 65 the text the time/art dichotomy as revealed by Shakespeare.

Q 5: Discuss the spirituality/sensuality dichotomy present in the treatment of love in sonnet 144 of Shakespeare.

Q 6: Elaborate Shakespeare’s poetic style with special reference to the prescribed sonnets. In what ways, has he used imagery in his poetry?



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