UNIT 1: GEOFFREY CHAUCER: PROLOGUE TO *THE CANTERBURY TALES*

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- learn about the life and works of Geoffrey Chaucer.
- explain the opening passage (11.1-42) of the General Prologue
- describe the poetic style and language of the poem
- appreciate of the opening passage of the General Prologue in totality.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to the opening passage (11.1-42) of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, a fourteenth century English poet. *The Canterbury Tales* represents Chaucer's fullest development as a poet. He concentrated on native English models and traditions for the tone and composition of the work and was able to provide a true picture of his time. With bold but deft strokes he created a living

world, one whose life is still fresh and vivid even after six centuries have passed.

In this unit we will introduce you to the life and works of Geoffrey Chaucer besides offering an in-depth analysis of the prescribed opening passage of the General Prologue. You will also find an elaboration of the poetic techniques he employed and the style and language he used in his works.

1.3 GEOFFREY CHAUCER: THE POET

Chaucer is the first great poet in the recorded history of English literature. Though he was often very busy with other pursuits, when he turned to writing he was, for his time, uniquely committed to letters. He devoted his considerable literary talents to the creation of verse that was lively and pleasing. He was not a captive of any special moral or political or social ideas, or of any set of manners. He rarely gave way to judgments or condemnations. His range and his sympathies seem almost limitless, and in this he resembles all the great poets, whose works may be considered "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time".

1.3.1 His Life

A prominent public figure of his age, Geoffrey Chaucer (around 1342-1400) is nowhere noted as a poet in surviving records, but there is no serious doubt about the identity of the poet statesman. Chaucer was born in London in the early 1340s, the only son of his family. Chaucer's father, originally a property owning wine merchant, became tremendously wealthy when he inherited the property of relatives who had died of the Black Death 1349. He was therefore able to send the young Geoffrey off as a page to the Countess of Ulster, wife of the King's son, Lionel. In 1359, he accompanied English forces to France where he was captured; he was ransomed in 1360. By 1366 he was married to Philippa Roet, a lady in-waiting to the Queen. Philippa's sister, Katherine, was mistress and taken wife of



Page: a youth receiving education and performing services at court or in a nobleman's household.

John Gaunt, Chaucer's patron. By 1368 Chaucer was an esquire in the King's household, and from then until 1374 he travelled extensively in the King's service to France, **the Low Countries**, and Italy where he might have met Petrarch, the Italian renaissance poet.



The Low Countries : Holland and Belgium

In 1374 Chaucer was appointed Controller of Customs of Hides, Skins and Wools in the part of London, which meant that he was a government official who worked with cloth imports. His experience of overseering imported cloths might be the reason for his frequent description of the garment and fabrics of his characters in details. He left this post in 1885 to serve as a justice of peace in Kent. In the next year he represented Kent in the Parliament and in the years that followed Chaucer's fortunes fluctuated, but in 1389 he was designated Clerk of Works, responsible for the maintenance of the Royal Palace and other royal properties. From about 1395, he seemed to have been in the service of Henry of Lancaster, son of John of Gaunt. Chaucer was well rewarded when Henry became King Henry IV in 1399, but he died soon after in 1400. His burial place in Westminster Abbey has since been ringed by the graves of later English poets and is known as Poet's Corner.



Black Death: Great epidemic bubonic plague that ravaged Europe in the 14th century, killing between 30 to 50 per cent of population.

Chaucer lived through a time of incredible tension in the English social sphere. The **Black Death**, which ravaged England during Chaucer's childhood and remained widespread afterwards, wiped out thirty to fifty per cent of the population. Consequently, the labour force gained increased leverage and was able to bargain for better wages, which led to resentment from the nobles and the propertied classes. These classes received another blow in 1381, when peasantry, helped by the artisan class revolted against them. The merchants were also wielding increasing power over the legal establishment, as the Hundred years war created profit for England and, consequently, appetite for luxury was growing. The merchants capitalised on the demand for luxury goods, and when Chaucer was growing up, London was pretty much run by a merchant

oligarchy, which attempted to control both aristocracy and the lesser artisan classes. Chaucer's political sentiments are unclear, for although *The Canterbury Tales* documents the various social tensions in the manner of the popular genre of *estates satire*, the narrator refrains from making overt political statements and what he does say does not or may not represent Chaucer's own sentiments.

LET US KNOW



The Hundred Years' War was a series of conflicts between England and France from 1337 to 1453. Its origins lay with the English Kings' possession of Gascony which the France Kings claimed as their fief, and with trade rivalries over Flanders.

The two kingdoms had a long history of strife before 1337, and the Hundred Years' war has sometimes been interpreted as merely intensification of these struggles. It was caused by fears of French intervention in Scotland, which the English were trying to subdue and by the claim of England's Edward III (through his Isabella, daughter of Philip of France IV) to the crown of France. After the war, domestic problems, such as war of the Roses, prevented England from attempting to conquer France again. It gave up continental aspirations and began to develop as a sea-power. France was ravaged by the Black Death, famine, and gangs of bandits, in addition to the devastation caused by the war. In both countries, the decline of the feudal nobility and the rise of the middle class allowed the monarchies to gradually become established.

The Peasants' Revolt was the rising of the English peasantry in June 1381. Following the plague of the Black Death, a shortage of agricultural workers led to higher wages. The statute of Labourers, enacted in 1351, attempted to return wages to pre-plague levels. When a poll tax was enforced in 1379, riots broke out all over England,

especially in Esser and Kent. Led by Wat Tyler and John Bull, the rebels sacked Canterbury and entered London, where they continued plundering, burning John of Gaunt's palace, and taking the prisons at Newgate and Fleet. The young King Richard II attempted to appease the mob, who demanded to end serfdom and feudalism. After Wat Tyler's murder rebellion was suppressed.

1.3.2 His Works

For convenience Chaucer's works are divided into three periods, the French, the Italian and the English, each one indicating dominant influences on his work.

The French Period (to 1372): Chaucer begins his literary career as a translator of *Le Roman de La Rose*, the famous 13th-Century love encyclopedia, by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Muen. It is a dream vision in which the poet finds himself in an exquisite garden where the God of Love reveled with his retinue. Wounded by Cupid's arrows, the poet earnestly desired a Rose bud (symbol of his lady). His suit is apposed by Chastity, Pity, and Fair Welcome. The lover, by the intervention of Venus, kisses the Rosebud but is banished from the garden. Many questions regarding the authorship of the Middle English version of the poem remain unresolved but most scholars today agree that the first 1705 lines were translated by Chaucer.

The Book of the Duchess or *The Death of Blanche* (1369) is a dream allegory in octosyllabic couplets lamenting the death of Blanche, the first wife of John of Gaunt. In it the poet falls asleep after being deeply moved by a reading of Ovid's story of Queen Alcyone. He dreams of meeting a black-clad knight in a forest. The knight sorrows for his lost Lady White (French Blanche) who he finally admits is dead. The poet awakes with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in his hand. It is a highly personal and tasteful elegy, the first full portrait in English literature of an English lady.



Ovid: Plabius Ovidius Naso (43 BC-17AD) a Roman poet whose poetry deals mainly with the themes of Love. His main works are Aras amatoria, Metaporphoses and Tristia.

The Italian Period (1372-85): During this period his works are modeled on Dante and Boccaccio. To this period belong *Anelida and Arcite* and *The Parliament of Fowles*. "Anelida and Arcite" is an unfinished poem and its subject matter receives fuller treatment in *The Knight's Tale*. The latter work is a dream vision in which the birds appear on St. Valentine's day before the goddess Nature to choose their mates. Nature holds in her hand a formel (or female) eagle, and three of her kind come for her love. The other birds are bidden to decide which is the worthiest, but after they have said their say the formel asks for a respite to consider for herself, and the birds fly away singing their roundel.

The House of Fame is a three-part vision in which the dreaming poet finds himself in a Temple of Venus, its glass walls engraved with the story of Dido and Aeneas. In Book II, Chaucer is carried up in the air by an Eagle who discourses on the theory of sound to the House of Fame, a bewildering place described in Book III. The poem breaks off abruptly as Chaucer meets a man whose name he cannot give: "But he seemed for to be A man of grat auctorite"

Troilus and Criseyde is a long poem adopted from Boccaccio. The story as adopted by Chaucer tells how Troilus, one of the sons of King Priam, was written with love for Criseyde, the Greek maiden whom the priest Calchas had left behind at Troy when he himself was ransomed, how by the help of her uncle Sir Pandarus he won her affection and love, lastly, when the fortune of war removed her from Troy, Criseyde proved faithless and gave herself to the Greek Prince, Diomede, written in seven-line stanzas, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde is full of human interest and pathos, vivid in colour and the sense of the beauty and fleetingness of life. He takes the story as Boccaccio told it, and humanises and enriches it at every point.

The Legend of Good Women is Chaucer's last love vision, written in the first decasyllabic couplets in English. In its Prologue the god of love upbraids Chaucer for treason and Queen Alcestis

bids him to write stories of faithful women as a penance. The earliest of the legends of cupid's saints, the stories of Ucopatra, Thisbe, and Dido are interesting but the theme Chaucer had chosen left little scope for variety, and he had written nine of the nineteen tales he had planned, he turned aside to take up a happier task, the composition of take the *Canterbury Tales.*

The English Period (1385-1400): During this period he wrote the most memorable poem in the English language up to that time, and one of the great poems of all English literature, *The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer tells how he joined in the Tabard Inn, Southwork, by a company of "Sontry folk, by adventure yfalle/ In felaweshipe, and pilgrims were they all" ready to 'wende' to 'Caunterbury'… the hooly blissful martyr for to seeks". The innkeeper proposes a tale-telling game to pass the time on the two-day ride to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket of Canterbury, killed by the agents of Henry II on December 29, 1170 at the altar of his Cathedral. The thirty pilgrims are each to tell two falls on the way and two on the way back, the teller of the tale of best sentence (moral import) and the most "solaas" (comfort, pleasure) wins a supper at the tabard paid for, by the other.

Thus the game creates the Tales; Pilgrim tales were proverbially known as "Canterbury Tales". The pilgrims tell twenty-four tales of popular kinds ranging from themes such as the lives of saints, moral fables, rude jokes, beast fables, sermons, penitential treatises etc.

While some of the tales in the *Canterbury Tales* reveal some of the characters, some like *The Nun's Priest Tale* do not. Chaucer is an author who makes fun of authority. The tales he himself narrates, such as those of Sir Thopas and Miliboeus, would not have won the supper. "Sir Thopas" is a parody of popular tail-rhyme romance, full of silly conventions, empty pauses and bad rhymes. The Host, missing the point, cuts him off with the comment that his rhyming "is not worth a tord". Chaucer then tells "a litel

thing in prose," like the lengthy moral fable of Miliboeus and Prudence. The author, dismissed by the Host, shows him the way to wisdom with many a sentence. Chaucer repositions himself with the speed of a humming bird. The detail of the General Prologue does not lead to social realism and there is no steady or a consistent moral point of view. Chaucer's Gothic switches of genre and tone are allowed by his comprehensive conception of life, physical, social, moral and metaphysical, shown from a variety of viewpoints. As his final retractions show, Chaucer's humanity has a theological dimension.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. On what basis are Chaucer's works divided into three periods? What are these periods?

Q2. Chaucer's first three major works were dream visions. What are they?



LET US KNOW

In England the most famous shrine was that of Canterbury which contained the relics of St. Thomas Becket, whose murder followed his quarrel with Henry II.

St. Thomas Becket (1180-1170), an English priest and politician, became Chancellor to Henry II and was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. The interest of the church soon conflicted with those the crown. Encouraged by a hasty outburst from the King, four knights murdered Becket before the altar of Canterbury Cathedral. He was canonised in 1772 and his shrine became the busiest centre of pilgrimage in England until the Reformation.

Modern readers are familiar with the account through the poetic dramas of Tennyson [*Beckett* (1884)] T.S. Eliot, [*Murder In the Cathedral* (1935)] and Jean Anouilh, [*Becket* (1959)].

1.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

The Prologue

Whan that Aprill with his **shoures soote**
The **drogthte** 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 halve cours **yronne**,
And smale foweles **maken melodye**,
That **slepen** al the **nyght** with open ye
(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
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The **hooly** bliss ful **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 pilgrimage
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 pilgrim were they alle,
That toward Caunterbury **wolden** ryde.
The **chamber**s and the stables **weren wyde**,
And wel we weren **esed atte beste**.



Whan: when
Shoures soote: sweet showers
Droghte: drought
Perced: pierced
Roote: root
Veyne: vein
Licour: liquor; moisture
Swich: such
Of which vertu: by virtue (beneficent power) of which
Flour: flower
Zephirus: west wind
Eek: also
Swete breeth: sweet breath
Holt and heath: wood and heath; grove and field
Yonge sonne: young sun (the astrological year begon with the entrance of the Sun into the sign Aries or the Ram, on March 12 (old style) in April, therefore, the Sun was still young.
Tender: tender; young
Croppes: shoots; tops of the plants.
Ram: astrology sign of Aries
Y-ronne: has run
Smale foweles: small birds



Maken: make
Melodye: melody
Slepen: sleep
Nyght: night
Priketh: incites; inspires
Hir: their
Corages: hearts; spirits
Thanne: then
Longen folk: people long; people desire
Palmers: pilgrims, (originally pilgrims to Holy Land, who brought thence a palm branch as a token of their journey)
Seken: seek
Straunge strondes: strange strands; foreign countries
Ferne: ancient
Halwes: hallows; saints; shrines
Londes: lands
Kowthe: known; renowned
Wenden: go
Hostelrye: inn
Shires: County's
Hooly: holy
Martir: martyr
Hem: them
Holpen: helped

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 oure 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 knight than **wol** I first **bigynne**

1.4.1 The Context of the Poem

The opening line of the General Prologue, "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote" immediately introduces us to the reverdie tradition – literally "re-greening", a mode of medieval lyric poetry celebrating the revival of spring and all that entails. The reverdie passage (el. 1-18) captures the creative uprush of new life all around as the sweet showers of April penetrate the dry earth of March. The wave of impulse that causes the birds to mate, as well as the plants to grow, is shared by the human folk and they desire to "goon to pilgrimages" This desire is something like the migrating impulse in birds. But its end is worship. Thus the poet explains his presence at the Tabard Inn outside London where he waits to begin pilgrimage to the Shrine of St. Thomas Becket in gratitude for aid during sickness. He then introduces the reader to the pilgrims and within the framework of the pilgrimage we are offered a series of sharp and revealing portraits. Chaucer's pilgrims are representatives of what were known in medieval times as the "Three Estates". Simply, this

was a three-tier social structure made up of those who fought, those who prayed and the commoners: in other words, the knightly class, the church and the rest. If we look at the group of pilgrims who gather with 'Chaucer, the pilgrim' in the Tabard Inn in Southwark, we can clearly see that he has collected representatives of all these three estates, ready to set out for Canterbury on the springtime pilgrimage.

1.4.2 Explanation of the Poem

The opening passage of *The Canterbury Tales* falls into two distinct parts, the first focusing on the Spring's renewal and rebirth and the second on the holy duty of the pilgrimage. The first part, which is a reverdie, presents a unified and ideal organic hierarchy– a great chain of awakenings from the rain to the roots of the plants, to the flowers, the Sun to the fields and the birds growing musical and drowsy, to humans who may sublimate the same impulses into pilgrimages to holy shrines of martyrs. This part really stresses on the creative energies of spring with words like "engendered", "inspired", "priketh" and so on. These words denote penetration and fertilisation, and the movement of the lines and short vowels in some words help to create a sense of the creative energy of a time when nature is charged with such vitality that even the birds sleep with one eye open : This creative impulse which causes the birds to mate, as well as the plants to grow, is shared by the human folk as they "longen" to "goon on pilgrimages" to renowned shrines in various distant countries. But many from different counties of England came to Canterbury to visit the relics of St. Thomas Becket, where they thank the martyr for having helped them when they were in need.

The second part starts with the words "BifIl" which conveys a sense of chance, offhandedness, subjectivity and personal specificity. The poet abandons his unfocussed, all knowing point of view, identifying himself as an actual person for the first lime by inserting the first person –'I'- as he relates how he met the group of



Seeke: sick
Bifil: it befell; it happened
Lay: lodged
Tabard: name of the Inn
Redy: ready
Compaignye: company
Sondry: sundry
By aventure: by chance
Yfalle: fallen
In felaweshipe: fellowship; company
Wolden: would; wished
Weren wyde: were wide and roomy
Chambres: chambers rooms.
Esed: entertained
Atte beste: at the best
Everichon: everyone
Hir: there
Anon: at once
Acordaunt: agreeable
Resoun: reason
Condicioun: condition
Ech of hem: each of them
Whiche: of what kind
Array: attire; dress
Wol: will
Bigynne: begin

pilgrims while staying at the Tabard Inn, in Southwork. He emphasises that this group of twenty nine pilgrims, which he encountered by accident, was itself formed by chance (el. 25-26). He then shifts into the first person plural, referring to the pilgrims as “we” beginning in line 29, asserting his status as a member of the group.

The poet ends the introductory portion of his Prologue by noting that he has “tyme and space” to tell his narrative. His comments underscore the fact that he is writing some time after the events of history, and that he is describing the characters from memory. He has met these people and spoken with them, but he has waited a certain length of time before sitting down and describing them. His intention to describe each pilgrim as he or she seemed to him is also important, for it emphasises that his descriptions are not only subject to his memory but are also shaping by his individual perceptions and opinions regarding each of the characters. He positions himself as a mediator between the two groups: the group of pilgrims of which he was a member, and us, the audience, whom the narrator explicitly addresses as ‘you’ in lines 34 and 38.

On the other hand, the narrator’s declaration that he will tell us about the “condicioun”, “degree” and “array” (dress) of each of the pilgrims suggests that his portraits will be based on objective facts, as well as, his opinions. He spends considerable time characterising the group members according to their social positions. The pilgrims represent a diverse cross section of fourteenth-century English society. Medieval social theory divided society into three broad classes, called “estates”: the military, the clergy, and the laity. In the portraits that we will see in the rest of the General Prologue, the Knight and the Squire represent the military estate. The clergy is represented by the Prioress (and her nun and three priests), the monk, the Friar, and the parson. The other characters from the wealthy Franklin to the poor plowman, are members of the laity. These lay characters can be further subdivided into landowning (the Franklin), professionals (the clerk, the Man of Law, the Guildsmen,

the physician and the Shipman), labour class (the cook and the Plowman), stewards (the Miller, the Manciple, and the Reeve), and the church officers (the Summoner and the Pardoner). As we will see, Chaucer's descriptions of the various characters and social roles reveal the influence of the medieval genre of 'yestates satere'.



LET US KNOW

The opening of *The Canterbury Tales* "When that Aprill with his shoures soote" is the first line of English verse that is widely known. In 1922, T.S. Eliot began his lament about civilisation, *The Waste Land*, reversing Chaucer's reverdia passage:

"April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain."

The difference that emerges between them is the difference between two phases of civilisation. The modern poem involves a consciousness of disharmony between man and nature, a disorganisation and dislocation of life. Something has gone wrong with the orderly relationship between man and nature which is Chaucer's starting point. The modern poem conveys the aimlessness of rootless lives which no longer appear to themselves to have social or other functions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. What is a reverdie? Why are the opening lines of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* so called?

Q4. Why did Chaucer's pilgrims go to Canterbury? Why was Canterbury regarded as holy?

1.5 POETIC STYLE

The style of an author is his distinctive manner of writing or expressing his thought in language. In commenting on Chaucer's style, it would be well to remember that he was writing in English at a time when that language was in a poor state of development. At that time French was the language of the court and the upper class. The language of the church was Latin, and English was spoken by common people who were largely uneducated and could neither write nor read. His sure instinct and judgement, however, made him choose the dialect of his native land when his contemporaries like Gower preferred to write in Latin.

To Chaucer goes the credit of having developed the condition of his native language to such an extent, that only the addition of blank verse was required to make English poetry fully equipped. His versatility in experimenting with new verse forms makes it impossible to exaggerate his importance as a creator of English versification. He brought to an inadequate dialect, the beauty of fluid simplicity, conversational case as well as literary grace. He took up a dialect and left it a language. He enriched it by adopting words from foreign languages, especially French. He infused the rough English dialect with the refinement and polish of the French language. He brought flexibility to his native language.

The opening passage of The Prologue is in the tradition of medieval writers, who paid tribute to and welcomed spring at the beginning of their works. But as D.S. Brewer observes, the triumph of the opening as literary art lies in its purposive structure and its style. In the opening passage we have smelt the spring air, and have swooped in imagination down from Zodiac to Tabard. The focus has carried us from a general view of the season to fix sharply on the pilgrims gathered at an inn near London. The vision was spacious, as well as, precise. The passage is written in a modified 'high style'. In the term 'Zephirus' connected with "swete breeth", we have the fanciful personification in combination with sensous realism. Splendour and simplicity are beautifully harmonised. The 'high' literary tone of the astronomical allusion is followed by a line of striking simplicity and musical

charm: “And smale foweles maken meloyde”.

But the ‘high’ style of the beginning gradually gives way to the plain and simple, which would be Chaucer’s appropriate style in the rest of the General Prologue.

The style stays ‘high’ for the first eleven lines. The twelfth line. “Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages” is plain and straight forward enough. The next two lines:

“And palmers for the seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes”

have a certain dignity and remoteness from everyday life. The next three lines show more of the common touch and brings the English reader home:

“And specially, from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende
The hooly blisful martir for to seke”

With the next line, “That hem hath holpen when that they were seeke” we come to clear simplicity and plainness. The transition is complete. From the elaborate beginning we have travelled to the easy familiar style, with a smooth and flowing manner.

In general, Chaucer’s style is direct, plain, conversational and even personal at times. His imagery is likewise direct and vivid, drawn from common and familiar fields of experience. He has a masterly ability of making a smooth transition from “high” to the colloquial style, without losing any fluidity of movement, as shown above. He shows a sure discretion and confidence in the choice of right words.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Briefly discuss Chaucer’s credit as a creator of English versification.

Q6. Comment on the state of the English language at the time when Chaucer wrote.

Q7. What is the general characteristic of Chaucer’s style of writing?

As we read the Prologue we are immediately struck by its conversational tone. The verse flows with a pleasing fluidity. It shows Chaucer's mastery of the decasyllabic line which he imported from France. It had been employed hardly at all in England previously – and he used it in both stanzaic and couplet forms. The seven line stanza (a b a b b c c) has become known as the Chaucerian stanza or Rime Royale.

We find ordinary speech, common proverbs and idiomatic terms, and even contemporary slang in his poetry. It provides a conversational slant to Chaucer's style. Some phrases, which Chaucer often tags on to the end of the lines in order to ensure an easy metrical flow, have a conversational and personal tone like "In Southwark at the Tabard as **I** lay" or "To take **oure** wey, ther as **you** devyse".

Numerous such other lines, seem to establish a direct contact with the reader which is the essence of conversation. It is done through phrases such as "I telle", "I gesee", "I seyde" etc.

A special stylistic device used by Chaucer is the emphatic manner in which he underscores his point. Some of his statements have an air of clear finality". "He was a verray parfit, gentil knight" sums up the knight in simple and direct words. Some of the words Chaucer uses frequently to intensify and emphasise a point are "ful", "al", "certainly", "wd". They are all affirmative and positive terms. It seems to indicate a stylistic device through which Chaucer associates himself with the positive and generous outlook of life.

Chaucer's style has a directness and immediacy, which comes from the habitual employment of the verb 'to be' in describing the pilgrims. His statements are so plain and simple that they admit no qualification.

The statements such as "pilgrims were they alle" or "I was hir felaweshipe anon" –are clear, solid and irrefutable. The terms in which the pilgrims are described, are simple and direct. The most common of adjectives used are, "perfect", "gay", "yain". They often gain their strength and directness through masterly placing in a line.

The simple immediacy which marks the adjectives used for the pilgrims, is to be found in Chaucer's images too. "The colours of rhetoric" was the name given to figures of speech in the Middle Ages. Chaucer uses

plenty of images and similes. But they are all simple, direct, and never elaborate. At the same time, they have vivid and arresting quality: “his mouth as greet was a greet forney’s” says Chaucer and we get a direct picture of the cavernous mouth of the Miller.

The images are derived from the common spheres of experience. They are uncomplicated and direct. Chaucer does not employ extended simile or metaphor in poetry. His images are drawn from homely and familiar fields of life. His imagery is likewise direct and vivid, drawn from common and familiar fields of experience. He has a masterly ability of making a smooth transition from “high” to the colloquial style, without losing any fluidity of movement, as shown above. He shows a certain discretion and confidence in the choice of right words. The charm of fluent simplicity and perfect appropriateness of word to thought, makes Chaucer’s style an important aspect of his poetry. The charm of fluent simplicity and perfect appropriateness of word to thought, makes Chaucer’s style an important aspect of his poetry.



1. 6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt about the illustrious life and works of Chaucer, the first great poet of English literature. You have also learnt how by choosing to write in English at a time when the language was in a poor state of development he turned English into rich vehicle of literature. You have also become familiar with the opening passage of his greatest work, *The Canterbury Tales*, the most widely known lines in English verse. Besides, you have become acquainted with his style and language he used in his writing. You have also learnt about the poetic techniques he employed in his poems, especially in the General Prologue.



1.7 FURTHER READING

1) Brown, Peter. (ed.) (2002) *A Companion of Chaucer*. London: Oxford University Press.

2) Bowden, M.S. (1964) *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. London.

3) Cooper, Helen. (1988) *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales*. London: Duckworth Press

4) Pearsall, D (1985) *The Canterbury Tales.* London: G. Allen & Unwin

5) Pollard, A. W. (1962) *The Prologue*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd.

6) Spiers, J. (1951) *Chaucer the Maker*. London: Faber and Faber



1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1. For convenience and to indicate influences on his work. Chaucer's works are divided into 3 periods-the French, Italian and English period.

Ans to Q No 2. *Le Roman de La Rose, The Book of the Duchess or The Death of Blanche.*

Ans to Q No 3. The reverdie tradition literally “re-greening”, a mode of medieval lyric poetry celebrating the revival of spring.

Ans to Q No 4. For holy pilgrimage. Many pilgrims went on pilgrimage to offer thanks giving.

Ans to Q No 5. Chaucer developed the condition of his native language to such an extent, that only the addition of blank verse was required to make English poetry fully equipped.

Ans to Q No 6. It was a time when language was in a poor state of development. French was the language of the court and the upper class. The language of the church was Latin, and English was spoken by common people.

Ans to Q No 7. Chaucer uses plenty of images and similes. But they are all simple, direct, and never elaborate. At the same time, they have a vivid and arresting quality. His style in general is direct, plain and conversational, even personal at times.

1.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. How does Chaucer pay tribute to and welcome spring at the beginning of his General Prologue?

Q2. Describe the spring season as presented by Chaucer in the opening lines of the General Prologue, How does it affect the 'human folk'?

Q3. Write a note on the 'high style' used by Chaucer in describing the spring season in the opening lines of the General Prologue.

Q4. How does Chaucer explain his presence at the Tabard Inn in Southwark in the month of April? Whom did he meet there?

Q5. "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages" – when do people "longen to goon on pilgrimages (long to go on pilgrimage?)? Where did people go for pilgrimage? Why did they go to the shrine of Canterbury?

Q6. How does the opening passage of the General Prologue of Chaucer express the sense of harmony between man and nature in the Spring season?



Q7. Write a note on the pilgrim's preparation to go on pilgrimage with a group of twenty nine pilgrims to the shrine of Canterbury?

Q8. Why does Chaucer tell us about the 'condicioun' , 'degree' and 'array' of each of the pilgrims gathered at the Tabard Inn?

Q9. Write a note on the theme of the opening lines of the General Prologue.

Q10. Write a note on Chaucer's style and poetic technique on the basis of the opening lines of the General Prologue.

Q11. Explain :

(a) "Whan Zephirus eek with its sweete breeth inspired hath in every holt and heeth the tender croppes, and the yonge sonne."

(b) "And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes/ To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes"

(c) "To telle yow al the condicioun / Of ech of hem, so as it semed me/ And whiche they weren, and of what degree."

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