

The Age Of Chaucer

Introduction:

For a profound and comprehensive study of an author's literary work is required, among other things, a thorough understanding of the age which produced and nurtured him. Without acquaintance with the historical context our evaluation and apprehension of literature is bound to be lop-sided, if not altogether warped and garbled. Every man is a child of his age. He is influenced by it though, if he is a great man, he may influence it also. A great writer like Shakespeare or Chaucer is generally said to be "not of an age, but of all ages." But, in spite of his universal appeal, the fact remains that even he could not have escaped "the spirit of the age" in which he lived and moved and had his being. So, for understanding him and his works in their fullness it is imperative to familiarize ourselves with the influential currents of thought and feeling and sensibility (not to speak of the socio-politico-economic conditions) obtaining in the times in which he flourished. Probably the Reverse of it is also true: we may acquire some understanding of these tendencies and currents, the ethos of the age, through the writer himself. Emphasizing this point, W. H. Hudson says: "Every man belongs to his race and age; no matter how marked his personality, the spirit of his race and age finds expression through him" The same critic cogently expresses the relationship between history and literature. "Ordinary English history' he says, "is our nation's biography, its literature is its autobiography; in the one we read the story of its actions and practical achievements; in the other the story of its intellectual and moral development." Though Chaucer transcends the limits of his generation and creates something which is of interest to the future generation too, yet he represents much of what his age stands for. And therein lies his greatness.

Chaucer's Age-Both Medieval and Modern:

Chaucer's age-like most historical ages-was an age of transition. This transition implies a shift from the medieval to the modern times, the emergence of the English nation from the "dark ages" to the age of enlightenment. Though some elements associated with modernity were coming into prominence, -yet mostly and essentially the age was medieval-unscientific, superstitious, chivalrous, religious-minded, and "backward" in most respects. The fourteenth century, as J. M. Manly puts it in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, was "a dark epoch in the history of England". However, the silver lining of modernity did "succeed in piercing, here and there, the thick darkness of ignorance and superstition. In fact, the age of Chaucer was not stagnant: it was inching its way steadily and surely to the dawn of the Renaissance and the Reformation, which were yet a couple of centuries ahead. We cannot agree with Kitteredge who calls Chaucer's age "a singularly modern time". For that matter, not to speak of the fourteenth, even the eighteenth century was not "modern" in numerous respects. What we notice in the fourteenth century is the start of the movement towards the modern times, and not the accomplishment of that movement, which was going to be a march of marathon nature. Robert Dudley French observes: "It was an age of restlessness, amid the ferment" of new life, that Chaucer lived and wrote. Old things and new appear side by side upon his pages, and in his poetry we can study the essential spirit, both of the age that was passing and of the age that was to come." What are these "old things and new:" and what made the age restless? The answer will be provided if we discuss the chief events and features of the age.

"The Hundred Years' War":

The period between 1337 and 1453 is marked by a long succession of skirmishes between France and England, which are collectively known as the "Hundred Years War". Under the able and warlike guidance of King Edward III (1327-1377) England won a number of glorious victories, particularly at Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt. The French might crumbled and Edward was once acknowledged even the king of France. But later, after his demise and with the succession of the incompetent Richard II, the English might waned and the French were able to secure tangible gains. The war influenced the English character in the following two ways:

(i) the fostering of nationalistic sentiment; and

(ii) the demolition of some social barriers between different classes of society.

It was obviously natural for the conflict to have engendered among the English a strong feeling of national solidarity and patriotic fervour. But, as Compton-Rickett reminds us, "the fight is memorable not merely for stimulating the pride of English men." It is important, too, for the second reason given above. It was not the aristocracy alone which secured the victory for England. The aristocracy was vitally supported by the lowly archers whose feats with the bow were a force to reckon with. Froissart, the French chronicler, referring to the English archers says: "They, let fly their arrows so wholly together and so thick that it seemed snow". The recognition of the services of the humble archers brought in a note of democratisation in the country, and the age-old "iron curtain" between the nobility and the proletariat developed a few chinks. This was an advance from medievalism to modernism.

The Age of Chivalry:

Nevertheless, the dawn of the modern era was yet far away. Compton-Rickett observes: "Chaucer's England is 'Still characteristically medieval, and nowhere is the conservative feeling more strongly marked than in the persistence of chivalry. This strange amalgam of love, war, and religion so far from exhibiting any signs of decay, reached perhaps its fullest development at this time. More than two centuries were to elapse before it was finally killed-by the satirical pen of Cervantes.'" The Knight in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is typical of his kind. Even the tale he narrates concerns the adventures of two true knights-Arcite and Palamon.

The Black Death, Peasants' Revolt, and Labour Unrest:

In the age of Chaucer most people were victims of poverty, squalor, and pestilence. Even well-educated nobles eyed soap with suspicion, and learned physicians often forbade bathing as harmful for health! That is why England was often visited by epidemics, especially plague. The severest attack of this dread epidemic came in 1348. It was called "the Black Death" because black, knotty boils appeared on the bodies of the hopeless victims. It is estimated that about a million human beings were swept away by this epidemic. That roughly makes one-third of the total population of England at that time.

One immediate consequence of this pestilence was the acute shortage of working hands. The socio-economic system of England lay hopelessly paralysed. Labourers and villains who happened to survive started demanding much higher wages. But neither their employers nor the king nor Parliament was ready to meet these demands. A number of severe regulations were passed asking workers to work at the old rates of payment. This occasioned a great deal of resentment which culminated in the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 during the reign of Richard II. The peasants groaning under the weight of

injustice and undue official severity were led to London by the Kentish priest John Ball. He preached the dignity of labour and asked the nobles:

When Adam delved and Eve span

Who was then the gentleman?

The king, overawed by the mass of peasantry armed with such weapons as hatchets, spades, and pitchforks, promised reform but later shelved his promise. The "Peasants' Revolt" is, according to Compton-Rickett, "a dim foreshadowing of those industrial troubles that lay in the distant future." Chaucer in his Nun's Priest's Tale refers in the following lines to Jack Straw who with Wat Tyler raised the banner of revolt:

Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meyne

Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille,

When that they wolden any Flemyng kille

As thilke day was mad upon the fox.

R. K. Root thus sums up the significance of this uprising: "This revolt, suppressed by the courage and good judgment of the boy King, Richard II, though barren of any direct and immediate result, exerted a lasting influence on the temper of the lower classes, fostering in them a spirit of independence which made them no longer a negligible quantity in the life of the nation". This was another line of progress towards modernism.

The Church:

In the age of Chaucer, the Church became a hotbed of profligacy, corruption, and materialism. The overlord of the Church, namely, the Pope of Rome, himself had ambitions and aptitudes other than spiritual. W. H. Hudson maintains in this connection: "Of spiritual zeal and energy very little was now left in the country. The greater prelates heaped up wealth, and lived in a godless and worldly way; the rank and file of the clergy were ignorant and careless; the mendicant friars were notorious for their greed and profligacy." John Gower, a contemporary of Chaucer, whom he calls "moral Gower" (on account of his didactic tendency) thus pictures the condition of the Church in his Prologue to *Confessio Amantis*:

Lo, thus ye-broke is cristes Folde:

Whereof the flock without guide

Devoured is on every side,

In lacks of hem that been urrware In chepherdes, which her wit beware

Upon the world in other halve.

Another contemporary has to say this about the priests "Our priests are now become blind, dark and beclouded. There is neither shaven crown on their head, nor modesty in their words, nor temperance in their food, nor even chastity in their deeds." If this was the condition of the ecclesiasts, we can easily imagine that of the laity. Well does Chaucer say in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*: "If gold rust, what shall iron do?" Chaucer himself was indifferent to any reform, but his character-sketches of the ecclesiastical figures in *The Canterbury Tales* leave no uncertainty regarding the corruption which had crept into the ecclesiastical rank and file. The round-bellied epicurean monk, the merry and devil-may-care friar, and the unscrupulous pardoner are fairly typical of his age.

This widespread and deep-rooted corruption had already begun to provoke the attention of some reformists the most prominent of whom was John Wyclif (1320-84) who has been called "the morning star of the Reformation." He started what is called the

Lollards's Movement. His aim was to eradicate the evil and corruption which had become a part and parcel of the Church. He sent his "poor priests" to all parts of the country for spreading his message of simplicity, purity, and austerity. His self-appointed task was to take Christianity back to its original purity and spirituality. He exhorted people not to have anything to do with the corrupt ministers of the Pope and to have faith only in the Word of God as enshrined in the Bible, To make the teaching of the Bible accessible to the common masses he with the help of some of his disciples translated the Bible from Latin into the native tongue. He also wrote a number of tracts embodying his teaching. His translation of the Bible was, in the words of W. H. Hudson, "the first translation of the scriptures into any modern vernacular tongue." That Chaucer was sympathetic to the Lollards' Movement is evident from the element of idealization which characterizes his portrait of the "Poor Parson" in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. The movement launched by Wyclif and his followers in the age of Chaucer was an adumbration of the Reformation which was to come in the sixteenth century to wean England from the papal influence.

Literary and Intellectual Tendencies:

Latin and French were the dominant languages in fourteenth-century England. However, in the later half of the century English came to its own, thanks to the sterling work done by Chaucer and some others like Langland, Gower, and Wacclif who wrote in English and wrote well. The English language itself was in a fluid state of being, and was divided into a number of dialects. The Universities of Cambridge and Oxford employed Latin as the medium of instruction. Latin was also the language of the fashionable who cultivated it as a social necessity. We recall here Chaucer's Summoner who "wolde speke no word but Latyn" after having drunk "well"! The contribution of Chaucer towards the standardization and popularization of the English language cannot be over-estimated. As regards his contribution to English poetry, he has well been characterised as the father of English poetry. No doubt there were other poets contemporaneous with him Langland, Gower, and a few more, but Chaucer is as head and shoulders among them as Shakespeare is among the Elizabethan dramatists. He stands like a majestic oak in a shrubbery. The English prose, too, was coming to itself. Mandeville's travelogues and Wyclif's reformatory pamphlets give one a feeling that the English prose was on its way to standardization and popular acclamation. As E. Albert puts it, "Earlier specimens have been experimental or purely imitative; now, in the works of Mandeville and MaJo/y, we have prose that is both original and individual The English prose is now ripe for a prose style."

In another way, too, the age of Chaucer stands between the medieval and the modern life. There was in this age some sort of a minor Renaissance. The dawn of the real Renaissance in England was yet about two centuries ahead, yet in the age of Chaucer there are signs of growing influence of the ancients on native literature. Chaucer's own poetry was influenced by the Italian writer Boccaccio (1313-75) and to a lesser extent, Petrarch (1304-74). The frameworks of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* are almost similar. However, it is somewhat doubtful if Chaucer had read the Italian writer. It was through the work of the two above-named Italian writers that humanism made its way into-English intellectual culture. Well does Compton-Rickett observe: "Chaucer's world is medieval; but beneath his medievalism the leaven of the Renaissance is already at work."

