

: STRUCTURE :**3.0 Objectives****3.1 Introduction****3.2 Historical Background****3.3 Cultural and Intellectual Background****3.4 Literary Background****3.5 Let Us Sum Up****3.6 Key words****3.7 Books Suggested****Answers**

3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To provide an overview of the age in which Geoffrey Chaucer lived and wrote.
- To provide background that helps to understand the social milieu of the Age of Chaucer.
- To enable the students to describe Chaucer's age-both medieval and modern and examine the literary and intellectual tendencies.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The unit will acquaint you with the different aspects of the Age of Chaucer which was the first significant period in the literary history of English literature. It was an age of transition from declining feudalism to an emerging money economy. 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. Chaucer's age was the turbulent period – social, political, and religious challenges. 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. It was an age of restlessness, amid the ferment of new life that Chaucer lived and wrote.

3.2 THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (1350-1400)

The second half of the fourteenth century (1350-1400) is referred to in the history of English literature as the Age of Chaucer. The age has been named after its representative poet Geoffrey Chaucer. It was a period of transition. This transition implies a move from the medieval to the modern times, the emergence of the English nation from the “dark ages” to the age of enlightenment. In spite of the fact that a few components related with modernity were coming into prominence, yet essentially the age was medieval in outlook -unscientific, superstitious, chivalrous, religious-minded, and “backward” in many 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“. Notwithstanding, the silve lining of modernity did “succeed in piercing, here and there, the thick haziness of ignorance and superstition. In fact, the age of Chaucer was not stagnant: it was crawling steadily and surely, to the dawn of the Renaissance and the Reformation, which were yet a two or three centuries ahead. In short, the fourteenth century was the age, when the seeds of modern age were being entrapped. Unrest and transition were the common features of this age. Geographical discoveries and the revolt against medieval traditions led towards the process of transition, which dates back to the second half of the fourteenth century. In the religious world, there was a serious outburst of unorthodoxy. In short, the Age of Chaucer marks the beginning of a new era, and new language and literature. It initiates a noticeable departure from medievalism and the birth of an era of rational inquiry and critical understanding. The main events and movements of the age of Chaucer can be described in the political, economic, social, religious and literary spheres.

Political Background

The Age of Chaucer includes the greater part of the reign of Edward III and the long French wars associated with his name the accession of his grandson Richard II (1377) and the revolution of 1399, the dethronement of Richard and the foundation of the Lancastrian dynasty.

The Hundred Years’ War

The long drawn out conflicts between England and France that occurred between 1337 and 1453 are collectively known as the “Hundred Years War”. In the course of this war Edward III secured English supremacy of the English Channel by the naval victory of Sluys (1340), established the prestige of the English soldiery and the military supremacy of the English

archers by the startling victory of Crecy (1346) and in 1347 captured Calais. A victory was won by his son the black prince at the Poitiers (September (1356) and Edward III was confirmed in the independent sovereignty of Aquitaine by the treaty of Bretigny in 1360. Edward III was the first king who conspicuously directed policy to commercial expansion, the security of the trade with Flanders being one of the object of his French wars. The war served one great purpose, that of fostering a new national pride among Englishman who had been living for long under the shadow of the French and had nearly forgotten this sense of national dignity. The victory at the battle of Crecy (1346) and of Poitiers (1356) kindled patriotism among largely won by the English yeoman, and middle class sprang up to ascendancy. It was this class rather than the knights of the aristocracy with their lances that determined the fate of war. The lowly archers rose in status and understood their power, power like a slippery feel slipped from the hands of the nobility. 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 democratization 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.

An Upsurge of Nationalism

It was an age in which there was a great upsurge of nationalism, and England was emerging as a strong nation. It was the period of Hundred Years 'War. England won glorious victories at Crecy and Poitiers. This gave her self-confidence and fanned the patriotism of her people. England was also becoming a united nation. Wales and Ireland had been absorbed, and the conquest of Scotland completed the United Kingdom. At least for the time being, as Hudson remarks, "Every fresh triumph served to give further stimulus to national ambition and pride."

Foreign Trade

The democratic tendency spread like wild fire in every walk of life. As the trade and commerce expanded and the new towns sprang up, the middle class become repository and a storehouse of power, which hastened the decline of the old feudal system. Now a dissatisfied and discontented serf could become a freeman by establishing a legal residence in one of the towns. King Edward III realized that it was an important duty of the government to foster foreign trade. The chief export at that time was raw wool. Edward III made that city the sole centre for foreign sales and ordered that all wool should be shipped in English ships.

This helped to promote the growth of two more national industries - shipbuilding and seafaring. The other branch of the wool industry – the manufacture of cloth also began to make headway in England at this time.

3.3 CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

The social structure of the Age of Chaucer was divided into the three conventional estates—the knight (nobility), the working man (the third estate) and the ecclesiastic (the church)

The Age of Chivalry

Chivalry was a system of ethical ideals developed among the knights of medieval Europe. Arising out of the feudalism of the period, it combined military virtues with those of Christianity, as epitomized by the Arthurian legend in England. The word chivalry comes from the French chevalier, meaning “horseman” or “knight.” Chivalry was the code of conduct by which knights were supposedly guided. In addition to military prowess, valor, and loyalty to God and the knight’s feudal lord, it called for courtesy toward enemies and generosity toward the sick and oppressed widows, and other disadvantaged people. Also incorporated in the ideal was courtly love — romantic devotion for a sexually unattainable woman, usually another man’s wife. Adoration for the Virgin Mary played a part in this concept. Chivalric ideals influenced the founding of religious military orders during the period of the Crusades, among them the Templars and the Hospitalers. In the late middle Ages, rulers formed secular orders of chivalry such as the English Order of the Garter (1349) and the Burgundian Order of the Golden Fleece (1429). By this time, however, chivalry had become largely a system of etiquette. Tournaments, in which knights had originally risked their lives in jousting combat before the ladies, became simply elaborate, stylized, and harmless entertainments. Moreover, the expense of this and other trappings of knighthood led many nobles who were eligible for knighthood not to become knights at all. From chivalry, always larger in literature than in life, comes the modern concept of the gentleman.

The age of Chaucer marked the highest development of medieval civilization in England. In fact, it was the midsummer of English chivalry. Although several changes in the life and thought of the people were taking place, in some respects, Chaucer’s England was 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 i.e. chivalry, so far from exhibiting any signs of decay, reached perhaps its fullest development at this time. 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.

Courtly love

Courtly love is the code of romantic love that enjoyed a vogue among the aristocracies of Western Europe, particularly from the 12th to the 14th centuries. In its literary form, it involved a vassal-lord relationship under which the knight was his lady's obedient servant, prepared to overcome any obstacle or undergo any suffering to win her favor. Courtly love was always conducted outside wedlock and of necessity in secret; between spouses it was held to be impossible. Although the unattainability of the beloved was sometimes central to the ideal, its customs served equally well to dignify adultery. The convention is first encountered in the late 11th-century poetry of French Provençal troubadours, but its origins are far from clear. Ovid's *Art of Love* (c.1 B.C.) widely drawn upon by medieval minstrels, is one source. The *Arabic Ring of the Dove* (1022), by Ibn Hazm, which contains most of the ideas associated with courtly love, is probably another. Whatever the primary source of courtly love, a cross-fertilization of ideas and practices certainly occurred. The rise of the cult of Mary, for instance, coincided with it; the great respect given to her by the church was reflected in the admiration of the noblewoman prescribed by the secular code. The ideals of courtly love were most clearly defined in the English and French royal courts presided over by Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter Marie de Champagne, under whose sponsorship some of the most famous books on the subject were written: Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot* and Guillaume de Lorris's *Le Roman de la Rose*. The convention influenced poets throughout Europe, notably Dante Alighieri and Petrarch in Italy and Geoffrey Chaucer in England, who in turn shaped the idea of courtly love to their own tastes and traditions. With the rise of the middle class, the ideals of courtly love were gradually merged into the institution of marriage, and through this reversal of the original values of courtly love, the concept has kept a stubborn, but altered, hold on the imaginations of most Westerners.

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. The sanitation in London was poor and living conditions were filthy. The River Thames brought more ships and infection to London, which spread to the rest of England. The crowded, dirty living conditions of the English cities led to the rapid spread of the disease. 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. The oldest, youngest and poorest died first. Whole villages and towns in England simply ceased to exist after the Black Death.

One immediate consequence of this pestilence was the acute shortage of working hands. The socio-economic system of England lay hopelessly paralysed. Labourers 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." 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” 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’ 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.

3.4 LITERARY TENDENCIES

The Age of Chaucer was the first significant period in the literary history of English literature. The period marks new era of new learning. 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. 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.

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. Compton-Rickett rightly observes: "Chaucer's world is medieval; but beneath his medievalism the leaven of the Renaissance is already at work."

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – 1

1. Chaucer's age was both medieval and modern. Explain.
2. Write a note on each of the following

- i. The Hundred Years' War
- ii. The Peasants' Revolt
- iii. The Black Death.

3. Write short notes on

- i. The customs of courtly love, chivalry, women and marriage in the Age of Chaucer .
- ii. Literary and intellectual tendencies of the Age of Chaucer .

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – 2

Choose appropriate option from given below.

1. Chaucer began to write “The Canter-bury Tales” in the year---

- (A) 1383
- (B) 1385
- (C) 1387
- (D) 1389

2. Who introduced “The Heroic Couplet into English Verse?

- (A) Lowett
- (B) Moody
- (C) Wycliffe
- (D) Chaucer

3. Chaucer was called, “The earliest of the great moderns” and was also called. “The morning star of the Renaissance” who initiated these remarks?

- (A) Hudson
- (B) Pope
- (C) Albert
- (D) Kittredge

4. In which year, “The Owl and The Nightingale” was published?

- (A) 1240
- (B) 1245
- (C) 1250
- (D) 1255

5. What does medieval Chivalry mean?

- (A) Criticism of women’s lovers
- (B) Indifference about women
- (C) Showy praise of women (a literary and poetic ideal)
- (D) Real and deep love for women

6. In which year the Normans lost their native land, Normandy and began to look upon England as their home?

- (A) 1200
- (B) 1202
- (C) 1204
- (D) 1206

7. "Ah ! freedom is a noble thing." Who is composer of this line?

- (A) Chaucer
- (B) Barbour
- (C) Dauglos
- (D) Saintsbury

8. Name the poet of the following poems--

(i) Sir Gawayn and the green Knight (ii) Pearl (iii) Purity (iv) Patience.

- (A) John Gower
- (B) Anonymous
- (C) Langland
- (D) Coleridge

9. Which of the following is not a contemporary of Chaucer?

- (A) John Barbour
- (B) John Gower
- (C) John Mandeville
- (D) William Langland

10. Which of the following four dialects was to become the standard English or The King's English by the time of Chaucer?

- (A) The Northern
- (B) The East-Midland
- (C) The West-Midland
- (D) The Southern

11. John Gower was born in the year---

- (A) 1335
- (B) 1340
- (C) 1345
- (D) Unknown

12. In the social Background of the age of Chaucer, there were there medieval institutions. Which of the following is not included in them?

- (A) Feudalism
- (B) Imperialism
- (C) Church
- (D) Chivalry and Knight-errantry

13. Which of the following completed the United Kingdom? It means the last conquest of....

- (A) Wales
- (B) Ireland
- (C) Scotland
- (D) England

14. Which of the four following dialects was “The London Dialect”?

- (A) The Northern
- (B) The Southern
- (C) The East Midland
- (D) The West Midland

15. Chaucer expresses his age---

- (A) In fragments
- (B) By particular things
- (C) As a whole
- (D) Through chivalry

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt about the age of Chaucer, a transitional one. Although the focus has been historical, ultimately you have learnt about the growth of towns, decline of chivalry, gender relations, people's beliefs, and the condition of the poor and varying literary ideals. In other words, you have acquired some idea of the life and values of the people at that time.

3.6 KEY WORDS

1. Transition: Change, Evolution, Shift
2. Upsurge: Rise, Gain , Expand
3. Nationalism: Patriotism, Jingoism
4. Chivalry: Politeness, Courtesy (for women)
5. Dawn: Daybreak, Before sunrise
6. Spiritual: Sacred, Pious, holy

3.7 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. History of English Literature by Legouis and Cazamian.
2. A Critical History of English Literature (Vol– I) by David Daiches.
3. An Introduction to the Study of English Literature by W. H. Hudson.
4. The Palgrave Guide to English Literature and Its Contexts by Peter Widdowson.
5. The Short Oxford History of English Literature by Andrew Sanders.
6. A Brief History of English Literature by John Peck and Martin Coyle.
7. History of English Literature by Edward Albert
8. A Short History of English Literature by Ifor Evans

ANSWERS

1(B), 2(D), 3(C), 4(C), 5(C), 6(C), 7(B), 8(B), 9(C), 10(B), 11(D), 12(B), 13(C), 14(C), 15(C)