Geoffrey Chaucer

and

his Position

in English Literature

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WHO IS CHAUCER?

- **Geoffrey Chaucer** (1343 – 25 October 1400), known as the Father of English literature, is widely considered the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages and was the first poet to be buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

- While he achieved fame during his lifetime as an author, philosopher, alchemist and astronomer, Chaucer also maintained an active career in the civil service as a bureaucrat, courtier and diplomat.

- Among his many works, which include *The Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, the *Legend of Good Women* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, he is best known today for *The Canterbury Tales*.

- Chaucer is a crucial figure in developing the legitimacy of the vernacular, Middle English, at a time when the dominant literary languages in England were French and Latin.

THE FRENCH PERIOD

- The French Period was directly influenced by the contemporary French poetry.

- He translated *Roman de la Rose*, a love allegory.

- He wrote *The Book of Duchessee* (1369) on the death of Blanche, John of Gaunt's wife. It consists of 1300 octosyllabic lines.

- Chaucer cultivated an allegorical style that fashioned his language.

- He learnt from French poetry the charm of fluent simplicity.

THE ITALIAN PERIOD

- The Italian Period (1372-1384) was greatly influenced by Dante's *Divine Comedia*, Petrarch's *Sonnets* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

- Some of the prominent works of this period are: the *House of Fame, The Parliament of Fowls, Troylus and Cryseyde* and *The Legend of Good Women*.

- Italian Renaissance made deep impact on Chaucer; for, in Italy, he saw a literature that was purely secular and humanistic in spirit.

- This period was characterized by variety and new technical innovations in Chaucer's poetry.

THE ENGLISH PERIOD

- The English Period (1384-1390) saw Chaucer as a full-fledged and an original writer.

- He wrote his master piece, *The Canterbury Tales*, through which the poet became the spokesperson of his age.

- Chaucer became "the first man to use 'naked words' in English; the first to make our composite language (English) a thing compact and vital."

- He portrayed a comprehensive picture of contemporary life.

- His 'realism' epitomizes the social, economic and religious condition of his age.

- Thus, this period witnessed vital changes and innovations in the singular great work of Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, which had changed the face of English language.

THE CANTERBURY TALES...

- Of this work about 17,000 lines are in verse; with two stories—the tale of Melibus and the Parson's Tale—in prose.

- Chaucer chooses the form of 'heroic' couplets.

- There are varieties of stories:

  # The Knight's Tale (a romance of chivalry)

  # The Monk's Tale (a moral story)

  # Sir Thopas Tale (a burlesque)

  # The Miller's Tale (a fabliau)

  # The Clerks Tale (a pathos)

- There are also variety of Characters:

  The Knight, the squire, the Merchant, the sailor, the scholar, the doctor, Monk, Labourers, etc,.

- The poets authentic characterization is done through personal observances.

- The humour that we find in Chaucer's works depicts the tolerance and the good humour of the English man of his contemporary society. Thus Chaucer looks upon comedy as a view of life.

- There is openness in Chaucer's language. Thus Rickett rightly points out:

His people are always on the move. Never do they become shadowy or lifeless. They shout and swear, and laugh and weep, interrupt the story teller, pass compliments, and in general behave themselves as we might expect them to in the dramatic circumstances of the narrative.

- Thus, through Canterbury Tales, Chaucer gives England, its culture, its language and its people a true identity

Geoffrey Chaucer

and

his techniques

in forming English Literature

1. Verisimilitude
   i.   Exemplum
   ii. Beast Fable
   iii. Fabliau
   iv. Palinode

* **VERISIMILITUDE** is the likeness or **semblance of a narration to reality**, or to the truth.

* It has its roots in both the **Platonic** and **Aristotelian dramatic theory of mimesis**, the imitation or representation of nature.

* Chaucer manipulates this in *Canterbury Tales.* We see the characters that are **ecclesiastical figures**; and people from different social standards: **yeoman, knight, squire, etc.**,(all laughing, moving, eating and gossiping as we do people in real life.

VERISIMILITUDE..

"Chaucer **symbolizes**, as no other writer does, **the Middle Ages.** He stands in much the same relation to the life of his time as Pope does to the earlier phases of the eighteenth century, and Tennyson to the Victorian era; and his place in English literature is even more important than theirs, for he is **the first great English writer**—the first man to use **"naked words"** in English; the first to make our composite language a thing compact and vital"

- Arthur Compton-Rickett

- An **EXEMPLUM** is a **moral anecdote**, brief or extended, real or fictitious, used to illustrate a point.

- Collections of Exempla helped **medieval preachers** to adorn their **sermons**, to emphasize moral conclusions or illustrate a point of doctrine. The subject matter could be taken from fables, folktales, legends or real history.

- Chaucer emphasizes a moral through **"The Nun's Priest's tale".** Through **"Friar's Tale"**, he talks at length about the Summoner's sins and the punishment of hell that he gets as a result.

EXEMPLUM..

"As of a fox, or of a cock and hen,

Take the morality thereof , good men!

For saint Paul saith, that all that written is

For our instruction written...

Then take the corn, and let the chaff be still

Now, gracious God, if that it be Thy will,

As saith our bishop, make us all good men,

And bring us to His heavenly bliss!—Amen"

(Nun's Priest's Tale)

- The **BEAST FABLE** or **beast epic**, usually a short story or poem in which animals talk, is a traditional form of allegorical writing.

- In this story, there is a male rooster named **Chanticleer** who is in charge of all seven hens in the henhouse. This includes the most beautiful hen **Pertelote**, who Chanticleer is madly in love with. A clever fox named **Don Russell** is the counterpart to Chanticleer and tricks him by telling him that he does not want to eat him, he only wants to hear him sing. When the rooster crows, the clever fox snatches Chanticleer and runs away. The commotion caused by the seven hens causes all of the animals on the farm to go after the fox. Chanticleer cleverly convinces Don Russell to confront the other animals. When he attempts to confront them, he loosens his grip, and Chanticleer escapes.

BEAST FABLE..

"...A cock, named Chanticleer;

Of crowing had he in the land no peer.

His voice was merrier than the organ's tone

In church on solemn mass-days loudly blown.

His crowing more exactly told the hour

Than did the great clock in the abbey tower.

...

His bill was black, like shining jet to view,

His legs and eke his toes azure-blue.

His talons whiter than the lily showed

And like new burnished-gold his colour glowed.

(Nun's Priest's Tale)

- A **FABLIAU** is a comic, often anonymous tale written in northeast France between **ca. 1150 and 1400**. They are generally characterized by an excessiveness of sexual obscenity.

- Several of them were reworked by **Giovanni Boccaccio** for the *Decameron* and by **Geoffrey Chaucer** for his *Canterbury Tales*.

- Scholars refer to six of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales as **"fabliaux": "The Miller's Tale"**, **"Reeve's Tale", "Friar's Tale", "Summoner's Tale", "Merchant's Tale", and "The Shipman's Tale".**

FABLIAU..

"A fabliau is a brief comic tale in verse, usually scurrilous and often scatological or obscene. The style is simple, vigorous, and straightforward; the time is the present, and the settings real, familiar places; the characters are ordinary sorts... the plots are realistically motivated tricks and ruses. The fabliaux thus present a lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes. Yet that representation only seems real... the plots, convincing though they seem, frequently involve incredible degrees of gullibility in the victims and of ingenuity and sexual appetite in the trickster-heroes and -heroines."

(The Riverside Chaucer, p. 7.)

- A **PALINODE** is **an ode** in which the writer retracts a view or sentiment expressed in an earlier poem.

- The first recorded use of a palinode is in a poem by **Stesichorus** in the **7th century BC**, in which he retracts his earlier statement that the Trojan War was all the fault of Helen.

- **Chaucer's** final section of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Legend of The Good Women* are apt examples, though his retractions are often comical and ironical.

PALINODE...

Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy
Of God, that ye preye for me that crist have
Mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes;and
Namely of my translacions and enditynges of
Worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in
My retracciouns:/ as is the book of Troilus;
the book also of Fame; book of
The xxv. Ladies; the book of the duchesse;
The book of seint valentynes day of the parlement
of briddes; the tales of counterbury,
Thilke that sownen into synne;/ the book of the
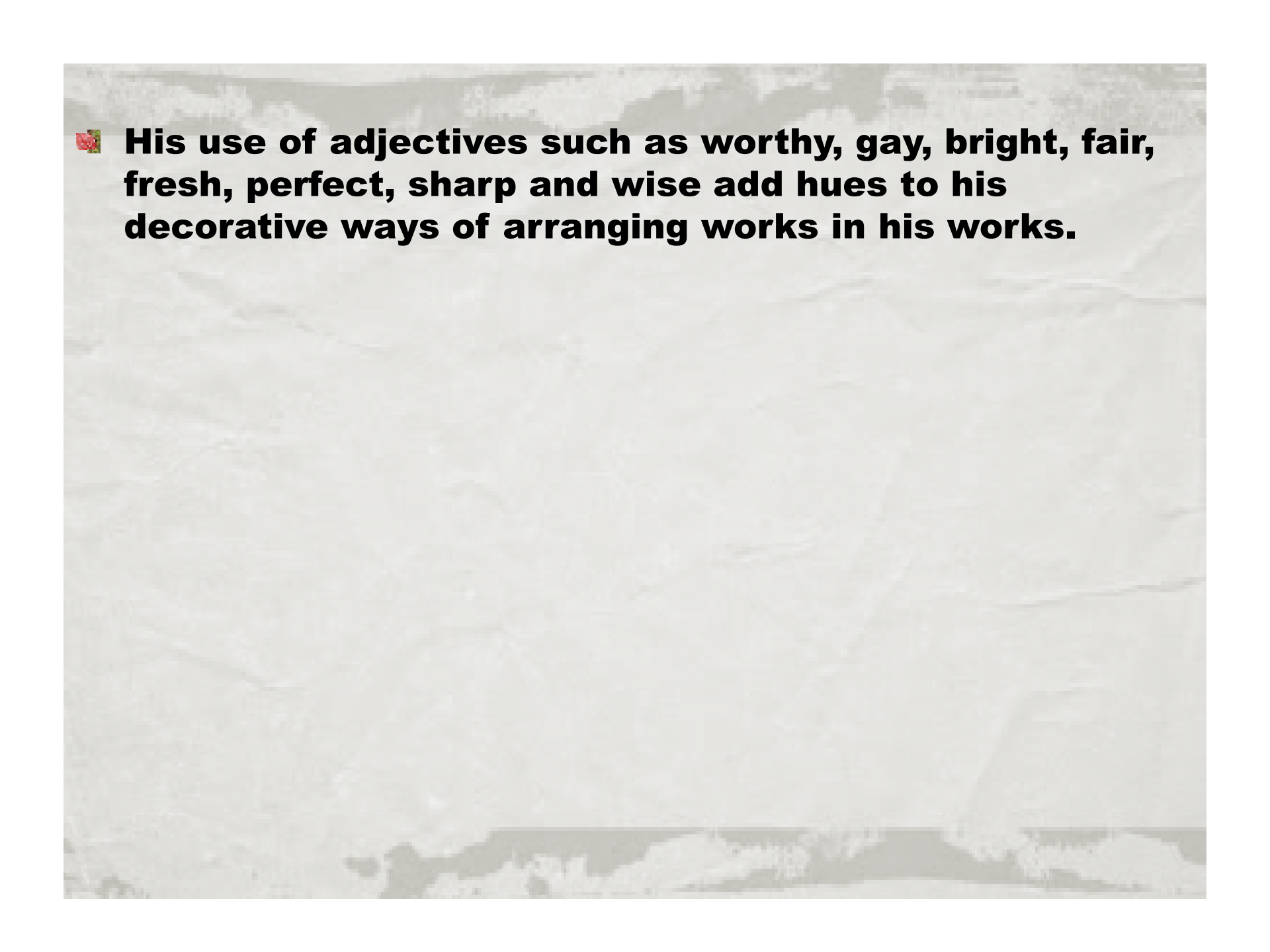Leoun; and many another book.

                                   (The Canterbury Tales)

CHAUCER'S LANGUAGE...

"His eye for colour was superb and distinctive. He had a very fine ear for the music of verse, and the tale and the verse go together like voice and music. Indeed, so softly flowing and bright are they, that to read them is like listening in a meadow full of sunshine to a clear stream riffling over its bed of pebbles."

- Stopford A. Brooke

- Since the Norman conquest of 1066, French had been the court language till 1363; and Chaucer began writing from 1364 onwards.

- During Chaucer's time, English was the language of the commoners, of the southern parts of England. There were four dialects: Southern, East Midland, Northumbrian and Kentish.

- Chaucer popularized the East Midland dialect through his masterpiece, The Canterbury Tales. He took efforts to polish the dialect and made the English feel proud of their language; for he added musical sweetness to English.

- His was not a stylish literary language; but, rather, a simple colloquial one. He uses "naked words" to relate with people and events.

His use of adjectives such as worthy, gay, bright, fair, fresh, perfect, sharp and wise add hues to his decorative ways of arranging works in his works.