Poetry
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Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400)

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We have so far seen, 6 lectures. The first 3 on the relevance of poetry, the approaches to poetry, and the functions of poetry are closely related to Simon Sinek's 'Golden Circle,' with 3 questions: why, how, what. The underlying assumption is, if we understand our own beliefs, it will be good for us, then our belief system will tell us how to do things and what to know about life and what to know about what we are doing. The next 3 lectures, the forms of poetry, poetic devices, and the music of poetry are related to the ways in which we approach poetry.

Now, we begin with the spring of poetry from Geoffrey Chaucer in English literature. He is considered to be the Fountain of English poetry for Spencer, Milton, Wordsworth, and many others, that is a tradition of English poetry. Geoffrey Chaucer was born in the fourteenth century, the exact year in which he was born is not very clear to us. So, we have fixed it something like, 1343 and he died in 1400. We look at the historical and literary context first, and then raise a question why is he called the father of English poetry? To answer this question, we examine Chaucer's achievements and one of his finest achievements is to create a place called, 'The Poet's Corner' and that has become a location for all poets to aspire for in Britain. Then we see

the 3 phases in the writings of Chaucer. We also go to the influence or the origin of 'The Canterbury Tales' in Boccaccio's Decameron. We see 'The Prologue,' 'The Three Estates' that Chaucer describes in the Prologue. We list the characters we find in the Prologue and also, we touch on the arrival of the pilgrims in this presentation.

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Historical Context

- Political and social conditions
- Edward III (r.1327-1377, Richard II (r.1377-1399), Henry IV (r.1399-1413)
  - Hundred Years' War between England and France (1337-1453) actually 116 years
  - The Black Death in England 1348-49 due to *Yersinia pestis* bacteria from flea infected rats and affected people; recurred during 1361-62
  - Shortage of labor and peasant exploitation led to the Peasant's Revolt in 1381
- Social changes: rise of the merchant class

Let us examine the historical context in which Chaucer lived and wrote his poetry. The political and social conditions of fourteenth century are marked by the reigns of Edward the third, Richard the second, and Henry the fourth. In this period, we have the origin of this Hundred Years' War between England and France, starting from 1337 to 1453 that is going into the next century. The war was fought for 116 years, but it is generally known as 100 years' war. In this war, Chaucer participated, he was also taken a prisoner once and released on ransom.

Another major event of this century is the Black Death. It came to England in 1348 and 49 due to a specific bacterium called Yersinia pestis. It affected a large number of people. It reoccurred again in 1361 and 62. We are lucky that Chaucer escaped the 100 years' war and also the Black Death. In this time also we find shortage of labor in the agriculture field and also for the military. As a result, we find large number of peasants being exploited by the gentry, the landowning class and the result of this exploitation was The Peasants Revolt in 1381. And these changes plus the rise of the merchant class in this historical time shaped the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer.

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Literary Context

- Dominance of foreign languages and literatures
  - French in the court and Latin in the church
  - Latent desire for a native pride in language
- Dream visions and allegories
- Satire against corruption in the church and court
  - Wycliffe's translation of the Bible into English
  - William Langland's *Piers Plowman*
  - John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (w.1386-90)
- G. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (w.1387-1400)

When we come to the literary context, we see that, foreign languages and literatures were dominant in England. French was commonly used in the court and Latin was used in the church. However, there was a latent desire in the people and also in the administration for a native pride in using English in their own communication.

In this period, we find two major forms of literature called Dream Vision and Allegory. Both of them are intermingled in some way. These dream visions and allegories were satires against corruption in the church and also in the court. We have two major examples of this satire: William Langland's "Piers Plowman" and John Gower's "Confessio Amantis." Though the title is Latin, John Gower wrote his poem in English. Next, we have Chaucer's own 'Canterbury Tales.' It was at this time we find a major effort to translate the Bible into English. That effort was carried out by John Wycliffe.

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Now we come to the question of why is Chaucer called the father of English poetry? We also have so many other questions. What did Chaucer do to earn this title? Can writing poetry in English alone gain a poet this title? Of course, there were many other anonymous old English poems in this period. There were other Middle English poets like William Langland and John Gower who wrote poems in English. They were the contemporaries of Geoffrey Chaucer.

In fact, it is surprising to see that John Gower received a more respectable burial when he died than Chaucer. Now the question remains, why Chaucer? We will see some answers now.

Father of English Poetry

- Why is Chaucer called the father of English poetry?
- What did Chaucer do to earn this title?
- Can writing poetry in English alone gain him this?
  - Many anonymous Old English poems exist.
  - Other Middle English poets like William Langland and John Gower wrote poems in English.
  - Gower received a more respectable burial than Chaucer.
- Why Chaucer?

Chaucer's achievements in poetry are remarkable. These are the various points which support our argument. He began telling a story within a story. He used the comment Saxon language, not French, not Italian in this Canterbury Tales. He took the chance to regularize iambic pentameter. This regularization happened with the consistent use of 10 syllables in a poetic line. And also, he started practicing end rhymes. In addition to all these he was a master of using irony and satire.
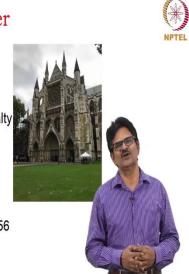
His irony and satire are known by his skill for gentleness, humaneness. He also portrayed characters realistically. You will see that the character you find in the Canterbury Tales are something like our neighbours. Another point we have to notice in his poem is the casual interaction with listeners or readers.

One more thing that we have to observe in the Canterbury Tales, particularly in this Prologue is cataloguing of characters, listing of characters. This is a technique called blazon. For all these things he is considered to be the first notable English poet, deserving the title "The Father of English poetry."

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A cultural aspect of Chaucer's writing is this. This is a heritage that Chaucer has left England with. There is a place called, 'The Poet's Corner' in England. This is a place of tourist attraction today. This is a section of the famous Westminster Abbey. It was here, William the Conqueror who conquered England in 1066 was crowned as the king of England. Thereafter, the coronations of all kings and queens usually have taken place in this church. Chaucer happened to

be buried in this place. If you ask why was he buried here? You will find some surprising answer.

He happened to live his last days near this church, within the precincts of this church. Why so? There is another reason. It seems that he had borrowed money from a number of creditors for some reason. They were pursuing him all the time. To escape from them he came and settled here. Anyone who lives within the campus of this church would not be disturbed. And when you died, he was buried within the church compound. After 150 years or so, a monument was raised for Chaucer in this place. From then on, the place is known as 'The Poet's Corner.'

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We notice 3 distinct phases in the writings of Chaucer. The first one is called French period with 3 books: The Book of the Duchess, The Parliament of Birds, The House of Fame. The second period called Italian period has 2 little writings: Troilus and Criseyde and Legend of Good Women. These two are known for their famous love poetry. If Troilus and Criseyde deal with the betrayal of love by a lady, Legend of Good Women support good women actually.

Then we come to the last period, that is the English period in Chaucer's life. Here we have this celebrated, 'The Canterbury Tales.' In this poem, Chaucer used the common English language used by people. He also used rhymed iambic pentameter. And you have the rhymed, couplets at the end of every two lines in the Canterbury Tales. In this poem, we have the realistic portrayal

of all classes of people. Most importantly we find a sense of fellowship with the author and other characters through the gentle use of irony and humour.

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Boccaccio's *Decameron* (w.1351)

- A collection of 100 tales using the story within a story framework
- ➢ The Plague in Florentine town in 1348
- Seven young women and three young men stay in a villa for 10 days to escape the plague.
- They tell ten tales a day making up hundred tales for entertainment.
- ➢ Chaucer's visit to Italy in 1372 and in 1378
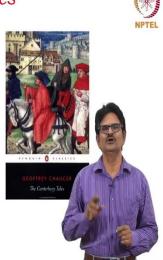- A model for Chaucer but he chose the medium of English for his poetry

The model for Chaucer's 'The Canterbury Tales' is the Italian writing called "Decameron," by Boccaccio. This was probably written in 1351. This is a collection of 100 tales using the story within a story framework. In 1348, there was a plague in Florentine town. Those who wanted to escape this plague went to some other place. In this story we have, 7 young women and 3 young men staying in a villa near the town, away from the town for 10 days to escape the plague.

To spend the time, they were telling 10 tales a day, making up 100 tales for their own entertainment. In his own lifetime Chaucer visited Italy twice, once in 1372 and another in 1378. Perhaps he met Boccaccio also, we have no evidence, concrete evidence actually. He found Boccaccio was very popular in his country, probably he got this motivation to write The Canterbury Tales from Boccaccio. He took this as a model and chose the medium of English for writing his tales in poetry.

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The Canterbury Tales

- A group of pilgrims from different parts of the country (29 mentioned in line 24)
- Pilgrimage to St Thomas Becket shrine at Canterbury
- Assembly at the Tabard Inn
- The narrator's interaction with them and desire to tell their stories
- Harry Bailly, the Inn keeper (Host)
- Each pilgrim to tell two tales on the way and two on their way back (total 120)
- 24 tales available now (two unfinished)

The Canterbury Tales deals with a group of pilgrims from different parts of the country. Chaucer mentions 29 pilgrims in line 24 in the Prologue, but we have some controversy about the number of pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales. The pilgrims met here to go on their pilgrimage to Saint Thomas Becket Shrine, at Canterbury. They all assembled here at a particular location called the Tabard Inn. The narrator started interacting with all these people and came to learn about their interest in life and their interest in telling stories as well.

The man who plans his idea of telling tales by these pilgrims is Harry Bailly, the Innkeeper of the Tabard Inn. He plays the role of the host, the guide, the governor, the judge for all these pilgrims. According to the plan, each pilgrim had to tell 2 tales on the way to the Shrine and 2 tales on their return. On the whole, it was planned to have 120 tales, but then, what we have now is just 24 tales. Of these 24, 2 are not yet fully completed.

The Prologue

- Total: 856 lines (Nevill Coghill's Translation)
- 1-42: General context and Pilgrimage
- 43-735: Characters (32 in the Prologue):
    all classes of people: courtiers, clergy,
    professionals, tradesmen, common people;
    men & women, young & old; urban & rural
- 735-766: Narrator's comment
- 767-856: The Host, Storytelling, and free meal for
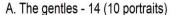   the best story

All these tales have the Prologue, this Prologue describes all these pilgrims. In our text, we cannot use the original Chaucer's English text, we may not be able to understand English. Though, it is called English, Middle English is not easily readable for us. We have to train ourselves to read Middle English. So, we are using Nevill Coghill's translation of Chaucer. In the Nevill Coghill's translation, we have 856 lines in the prologue. In the first 42 lines, we have the general context and the idea of the pilgrimage. In the next section from 43 to 735, we have all these characters being described.

They belong to all classes of people, we have courtiers, clergy, professionals, tradesmen, common people, men and women, young and old, urban and rural we have all kinds of people. Then in the next part, from 735 to 736, we have the narrator's own comments about his own storytelling. And in the last section from 767 to 856, we have the host and he tells us about the planning of storytelling. He also thinks about one idea of free meal for the best story, for the person who tells the best story.

Three Estates
the military, the church, and the labor

A. The gentles - 14 (10 portraits)
   1. The Knight, the Squire, and Yeoman
   2. The Prioress, the Monk, the Friar, the Second Nun and three priests
   3. The Merchant, Clerk, Sergeant of Law, Franklin
B. The commoners - 16 (12 portraits)
   1. The Five Guildsmen, the Cook, the Shipman, the Physician, the Wife of Bath
   2. The Parson and the Plowman
   3. The Miller, the Reeve, the Manciple, the Summoner and the Pardoner

In this prologue and in the whole of this Canterbury Tales, we have this concept called 'Three Estates.' Actually, there is a form of literature called estate satire. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales can easily be classed along with this estate satire, because of the element of satire we have in the Canterbury Tales. What are those Three Estates? one is the military, the second is the church, and the third is the labourer or labor class, working class. All these characters are divided generally into two categories: gentles and commoners.

Within the gentles we have 3 classes of people: first aristocrats- the Knight, the Squire and the Yeoman. The second category- the Prioress, the Monk, the Friar, the Second Nun, and the Priests all belonging to Clergy. And the third category- the Merchant, Clark, Sergeant of Law, Franklin belonging to higher level of this landed class people. And then, in the second class of commoners, we have 3 groups. The Five Guildsmen, the Cook, the Shipman, the Physician, and the Wife of Bath all belong to one group. They have something to do with the professionals.

And the second one belongs to Clergy, the Parson and the rural person that is the former called the Plowman. And in the third category we have a distinct class of people who are marked for their absence of character, integrity and many other good qualities of being human. The Miller, the Reeve, the Manciple, the Summoner, and the Pardoner. So, we have different kinds of people broadly divided into 2 groups: the gentles and the commoners. And within this we have 3 levels of people based on their social class and also based on their moral quality.

Characters

1. The Knight
2. The Squire
3. The Yeoman
4. The Nun
5. The Second Nun
6. The Nun's three Priests
9. The Monk
10. The Friar
11. The Merchant
12. The Oxford Clerk
13. The Sergeant at Law
14. The Franklin
15. The Guildsmen (5)
20. The Cook
21. The Skipper
22. The Doctor
23. The Wife of Bath
24. The Parson
25. The Plowman
26. The Miller
27. The Manciple
28. The Reeve
29. The Pardoner
30. The Summoner
31. The Narrator
32. The Host

These are the characters we have in the Prologue. Just let me read them one after another. You will see that there are 32 characters mentioned within the Prologue. The Knight, the Squire, the Yeoman one group. The Nun, the Second Nun, the Nun's three Priests, the Monk, the Fryer, the Merchant, the Oxford Clerk, the Sergeant at Law, the Franklin another group. The Guildsmen, The Cook, the Skipper, the Doctor, the Wife of Bath at another group. The Parson, the Plowman, the Miller, the Manciple, the Reeve, the Pardoner, the Summoner at another group. The Narrator is a class by himself, similarly the host is a separate character by himself.

The Arrival of the Pilgrims

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,
5. 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

Now we move on to the poem actually, The Arrival of the Pilgrims. We have this arrival in the first 18 lines. As we said earlier, we are using the translation of Nevill Coghill. Let us begin.

"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,

5. 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 foul are making melody."

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The Arrival of the Pilgrims

10. 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,
15. And specially, from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
18. To give his help to them when they were sick.

10. That sleep away the night with open eye

(So nature prick them and their heart engages)

Then people long to go on pilgrimages

And palmers long to seek the stranger stands

Of for-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,

15. And specially, from every shire's end

Of England, down to Canterbury they wend

To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick.

To give his help to them when they were sick."

These are the pilgrims they have arrived at the Tabard Inn in the spring season when everything is fine. When there is a renewal of life, the pilgrims themselves want to have a renewed life by visiting Canterbury, by seeking the blessing of Thomas Becket to show their gratitude to this martyr, blissful martyr. So, that is the beginning of this prologue.

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In this presentation so far, we have seen the historical and literary context of Chaucer's times. We discussed why Chaucer is the father of English poetry by focusing on the achievements of Chaucer and also mentioning The Poet's Corner. We mentioned the 3 phases of Chaucer's writings. And finally, focused on the English period in which Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales, using Boccaccio's Decameron as a model. We started discussing the Prologue, particularly we mentioned about the Three Estates to which the characters belong. Then finally

we looked at the arrival of the pilgrims. We have received them. Now, let us see the descriptions of these pilgrims at least some of them in the next presentation.

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References

- Greenblat, Stephen. 2012. gen. ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*, Volume A, 9th ed. Norton, New York.
- Morgan, Gerald. 2003. "Moral and Social Identity and the Idea of Pilgrimage in the General Prologue," *Chaucer Review*, 37 (4): 285-314.

We have some references for you. If possible, please do read. In this case, we have a research journal called Chaucer Review. It is wonderful to read at least one article from this journal to understand more about Chaucer and his Canterbury Tales. Thank you.