

ANGLO - SAXON LITERATURE [650 -1066]

In the fifth and sixth centuries the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, commonly known as the Teutonic tribes, came to the Roman province of Britannia. These tribes men were fierce in battle but enjoyed singing and merry making. The Anglo-Saxons worshipped pagan Gods like earth, heaven and powers of nature. The doings of these powers were made into mythical stories and when a great hero arose, his history also grew into a saga. This was the origin of the early unhistorical sagas.

Much of this heathen poetry has been lost and what remained were the *Beowulf*, the *Junius*, which contain, the so called Caedmonian poems, the *Exeter Book*, containing two of the signed poems of Cynewulf and the *Vercelli Book*. Anglo Saxon poetry consisted of personal and Elegiac poems, war songs, riddles, and epic poems. Some of the prominent books of this group are *Widsith*, which consists of 150 lines of verse, *The Wanderer*, an elegiac poem; *The Seafarer*, a monologue etc. Anglo Saxons were adventurous people and hence their war songs contain more heathenism and no christian gentleness. eg : *The Battle of Maldon*, which tells us about the battle between the Danish Pirates and Earl of Maldon.

One of the most curious and interesting of Anglo - Saxon poems is a collection of Riddles, which were considered a more dignified literary form. They are imaginative and picturesque. *Beowulf*, a poem over 3000 lines in length, is the oldest epic in Germanic literature. The poem is remarkable for its blending of pagan and Christian elements, and its historical value lies in describing the social life and beliefs of Pre-Christian times. The poem narrates the adventures of a gallant, Beowulf, who puts three dragons or monsters to death. The poem concludes with the funeral of the hero.

The poetry of the Anglo - Saxons was sung, for they were the singing folk and held the scop (singer) and the gleemen (poet) in high esteem. Anglo-Saxons lived in close proximity with nature and this fondness for nature finds a remarkable expression in old English poetry. With the growth of Christian sentiment a new spirit appears in Anglo - Saxon literature. Paganism, fatalism and melancholy gave place to Christian hope and faith

Caedmon and Cynewulf were the two representative poets of the old English (OE) Christian poetry, which was essentially religious. Caedmon, according to Venerable Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, was a poor cowherd of the monastery at Whitby in Northumbria and was hailed in his stable by an angel who bade him sing of the creation. Caedmon although unlettered and with no gift of song, sang of the creation and of the glory of the creator. As Caedmon was divinely inspired, he composed only religious poems. His chief work was the so-called *Paraphrase*.

Cynewulf was a writer of great influence and a poet of genuine power. Yet nothing was known of him. In 1840 the scholar Kemble lighted upon three Runic signatures that appeared in poems called *The Christ*, *Juliana*, *Elene* and *The Fates of the Apostles*. *The Christ* is a didactic poem and reflects the spirit of early Latin Christianity. He was the most careful artist among the older poets, notable for the skill of his verse and phrasing ; his lines are flowing and melodious and his style, free and easy.

Alfred, King of Wessex (849-899), in the 9th century is recognized as the father of English Prose. He was the pioneer among Anglo Saxon prose writers. He aimed at improving the lamentable state of English learning. He began to learn Latin so that he might translate the works that would be helpful to his people. Among his important translations are the *Pastoral Care* of Pope Gregory, *History of English Literature* etc.

Gregory, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* etc. Another one is *Handbook* which contains extracts from the Bible and the fathers, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was also inspired and organised by him. It is a record of the deaths of kings beginning with Caesar and the installations of bishops.

Alfred's prose style was a highly latinised one. He gave English prose strength and dignity by introducing a large amount of Latin element into old English prose style. Wulfstan, Archbishop of York, was another popular writer of the period. His *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* is the most forceful prose in old English, composed by a master of oratory using all the devices of rhyme, assonance and alliteration. Aelfric was another notable writer. He was scholarly, cultured and a good Latinist and wrote a lighter, clearer and more musical prose.

Anglo Saxon prose is much nearer than Anglo Saxon poetry to modern English. With the Norman Conquest the poetry almost destroyed but inspite of changes during 300 years of their domination, prose retained its status.

NORMAN CONQUEST - 1066

Effect of the Norman conquest of England on English poetry.

The literary ideal changed at the Norman Conquest of 1066. The Normans represented the civilization of France which was the literary and educational centre of all Europe. They brought with them law, culture administration and their French literary ideals. French permeated the literature of the Anglo Saxons so thoroughly that when English composition began again it was founded both in matter and form on French work.

The most universal trait of middle English poetry is clarity. To pass from *Beowulf* to *Chanson de Roland* is like coming from gloom into light. This sense of light is everywhere. From the predominance of consonants in old English poetry to the use of vowels or diphthongs produced clarity and melody. In French, vowels are important, their repetition in rhyme or assonance replaces the pleasure of alliteration. Anglo Saxon alliterative verse was replaced by rhyme.

Another significant change was, the Anglo Saxon democratic spirit ended with Langland and there began a literature of high society. Romantic note was also introduced as a product of the institution of knighthood, and the Crusades with the saracens. Saxons sung of battle and of beauty but not of the tender passion of Love. There had been no recognition of woman's subtle power in the hearts and lives of men until the Norman poets had introduced their forms of courtly gallantry, had sung the devotion of knight to lady and had spoken of the rewards of love. Among the earliest of the English poems to reflect this influence of the French are the three metrical romances of Sir *Tristram Havelock*, the *Dane* and *King Horn*.

Anglo Saxon poets depicted sinister landscapes and mournful scenes with truth and vigour. But delightful scenes appear profusely in Middle English verse eg: May with her flower decked meadows and singing birds. Mild natural scenery takes its place of pride after the Norman Conquest.

The extent of the French influence on English prose

The conquest of England by the Normans seemed at first likely to crush the English people, destroy their literature and to threaten their speech. Within three centuries of contact with the Saxon, the Norman became an English man and he started to speak and write in English. Englishmen accepted them with open hands. The Normans were the first to bring the French civilization to England. It was the welding of Saxon and French into one speech that produced the wealth of Modern English.

During the period of Normans English was not used for literary purpose. The Anglo -Saxon population continued to employ only the English language. French was the language of the nobility, the courts and the seats of learning while in the monastery and church Latin was prominent. Thus beneath the two - fold oppression of French and Latin writings English lay prone for nearly three centuries.

The most important remnant of old English prose was the *English Chronicle*; the old books, chiefly those of Aelfric and Alfred, were read, copied and revered but no making of new books. The court knew only French. In the castles, in rich monasteries, the noble and the learned spoke only French. What was written in theology, history, science was in Latin. But the people of towns, villagers and the commonfolk held fast to the old English handbooks, songs, and sages of England. They all hoped to free their country from the invaders.

Medieval romances

Medieval romances, which satisfied the craze for story telling in the Anglo - Norman period, were French in origin. These works of chivalry had flourished in France; they were composed by Norman Poets in Norman French and later were written in English. These fascinating poetic tales were mostly accounts of the valiant or marvellous adventures of medieval heroes. The subject was most often then the adventures of the knight against robbers, giants or saracens, or against the buffets of poverty, adverse love or other misfortunes. They told of thrilling, the extravagant and the supernatural and showed glimpses into the habits of the times.

The material for these tales came from three principal sources: the matter of France, the matter of Rome and the matter of Britain. Matter of France deals largely with the exploits of Charlemagne and his peers. The Matter of Rome consisted largely of tales from Greek and Roman sources -the deeds of Alexander, the siege of Troy, the story of Thebes and classical legends as occurring in Virgil and Ovid.

The romances dealing with early English history and its heroes were the most popular. They were Horn, Havelock the Dane, Guy of Warwick and Bevis of Hampton. Tales of king Arthur and the knights of the Round Table were very popular. A number of these Arthurian legends of Celtic origin were collected by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his book called *Historia Regum Britannie*. Thus the true father of the Arthurian legend is Geoffrey of Monmouth. Beside the story of King Arthur centred many stories of Merlin, Gawain, Lancelot, Tristram, Perceval and of the Holy Grail.

Among these the romances of Sir Gawain and Green Knight are the most charming. The main characteristics of these works is that they are written with the alliterative measure of the epic, and combined with a lyrical element. They show close acquaintance with the courtly life of the age and writer was evidently a lover of the chase. It has, therefore, some historical value. It is remarkable for the deep and tender love of nature displayed throughout the poem, and some of its most delightful passages describe the charms of wild scenery. It displays an intimate knowledge of medieval craftsmanship and art. It shows literary power in its treatment of the story, avoiding monotony and repetition with skill. It is, in essence, didactic, being a study of chastity.

Another Arthurian masterpiece was a prose romance, *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. It is a skilful blend of dialogue and narrative and is full of colour and life. The material romances which the Normans brought with them

expressed the romantic spirit of the time. The romances are the epitome of the Middle English life - the life of the English castles and courts.

The lyric in the middle English period

There is no direct evidence for the existence of lyric poetry in England before the twelfth century. It was greatly influenced by the lyric poetry in French and Latin. The earliest English lyric, the four-line *Crut's Song*, was reportedly composed in the 11th century by King Canute. This lyric is significant because it makes an attempt to produce a quatrain rhyme, assonance and regular rhythm.

Generally the lyrics are classified as secular or religious, although it is not always easy to differentiate between the two. The religious lyrics were much greater in number than the secular. They are subdivided into Latin hymns, hymns to the Virgin, the sacred lullaby, the allegorical lyric and the miscellaneous religious poetry.

The secular lyric emerges about 1250. Many of them herald the return of spring and the green world. *Alysoun* with its dainty refrain and sincere affection of the lover for his real earthly love is a gem in Middle English lyrical literature. It is the first perfectly delightful song in English poetry.

The middle English lyrics were written both on religious and secular subjects. In these lyrics the influence of French and Latin literature is obvious and important. From old English the only borrowings which we can distinguish are a sense of the transitoriness of worldly things and a fondness for alliteration. On the whole the vernacular lyric poetry does not disappoint us much. The mere technical achievement of the early poets is amazing. Most of the simple stanza forms, and many of the more complex ones are handled with considerable skill and mastery and the maturity of this technique is one of the most surprising things about middle English literature.

King Alfred the Great

King Alfred, the greatest of the Anglo Saxon kings was a Protean genius, an all-rounder, and his many sided talents proved beneficial to the country. He became King of Wessex in 871. During his reign, the Danes invaded his country and indulged in violent acts of vandalism. Alfred fought the Danes and kept them at bay. He was not only the military saviour of his people. Liquidation of illiteracy was his ruling passion. He encouraged learning in his kingdom by becoming a patron of scholars. *Pastoral Care of Pope Gregory*, *Soliloquies of St. Augustine*, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* were his translated works. *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was organised by him.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a venerable monument of old English prose. Out of the notes of events kept in the monasteries, king Alfred conceived the idea of a national history of England. He inspired and organised the work. It is a record of the deaths of kings beginning with Caesar and the installations of bishops which the monks of various monasteries were in the habit of making on the Easter rolls. It is the oldest monument of English prose recording the history of England from the time of the Roman occupation to the middle of the 12th century (1154).

Beowulf

Beowulf, an epic of more than three thousand lines, is the work of the Teutonic race. It is the oldest epic in the Germanic literature. Before it was put to writing, it existed in short pagan ballads each celebrating some separate act of the hero. The poem deals with the adventurous exploits of Beowulf who kills three dragons and is killed in the end. The scenes and people are Scandinavian and the poem is replete with descriptive passages. He represents the English ideal of courage and nobility. The poem throws light on the social life of the Anglo-Saxons, their love of adventure, their zest for the sea, the primitive courtly life and so on. There are no stanzas, no rhyme but regular alliteration in every line. Metaphysical phrases and compound words are another speciality of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Eg : The swan road (sea); Ring - giver (King); battle -flash (sword)

Venerable Bede

Venerable Bede (672-735) was a prominent prose writer of the Anglo-Saxon period. He wrote mainly in Latin. He was an inmate of the Yarrow monastery. An academic recluse, he dedicated his whole life to the pursuit of knowledge. His favourite subjects were history, astronomy, lives of martyrs and saints etc. He can be called the first English historian, his monumental work is *Ecclesiastical History of the English Race*. King Alfred caused this great work to be translated into English so that unlettered men might know their country better. Bede set to English the model of simple, lucid and unsophisticated style. Alfred's prose style owed a lot to the model founded by Bede.

Form and style of Anglo-Saxon poetry

Anglo Saxons were the singing folk and their poetry was made to sing. The metric unit is the single line. Rhyme is rarely used, but compound words were used. There was no simile, uniform is their poetry in accent, style and metre that it becomes almost monotonous. There is no light or shade in the song. The traditional form and single line give an air of grandeur to particular poems but not to all. The epic unity of form and tone is at first impressive, but its continued tension grows wearisome and the periphrastic accompaniment enriches but over weights and obscures the style.

SHORT NOTES

- 1. Caedmon :** He was one of the great poets of the old English Christian poetry which was religious. Caedmon was a poor cowherd of the monastery at Whitby in Northumbria. According to Bede, he was hailed in his stable by an angel who lauded his singing of the creation. Although unlettered and with no gift of song, he sang of the creation and of the glory of the creator. As he was divinely inspired he composed only religious poems.
 - 2. Cynewulf :** Beside Caedmon, the only one of the old English poets known by name is Cynewulf. He was a writer of great influence and a poet of genuine power. Nothing was known about him till 1840, when the scholar Kemble came upon three Runic signatures which appeared in the poems, *Christ, Juliana, Elene* and *The Fates of the Apostles*. A search was made in history and he was identified as the Bishop of Lindisfarne and lived in the middle of the eighth century.
 - 3. Aelfric :** Aelfric was one of the pupils of the Benedictine monastery at Abbingdon in the middle of the tenth century. He was scholarly, cultured and a good Latinist and wrote a lighter, clearer and more musical prose. Among his works, the most important are the two series of *Catholic Homilies* and the *Lives of Saints*. His style is natural, easy and alliterative. It is poetic in cadence.
 - 4. Wulfstan :-** Wulfstan was the Archbishop of York, a known homilist, and his fame in literature rests mainly on a single homily composed in the year 1014, titled *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*. It is fluent and powerful. This is the most forceful prose in old English, using all the devices of rhyme, assonance and alliteration. His style is that of a preacher.
- The Angles, Saxons and the Jutes were commonly known as
 - *Teutonic tribes*
 - What kind of poem is *The Seafarer* ?
 - *Monologue*
 - The work which is regarded as the oldest epic in Germanic literature.
 - *Beowulf*
 - Who is regarded as the father of English prose ?
 - *Alfred, King of Wessex*
 - Le Morte d' Arthur*, a prose romance, was written by
 - *Sir Thomas Malory*

THE AGE OF CHAUCER

The Age of Chaucer is one of the most active, vexed and entangled transitional periods in the history of England. The time was the meeting ground of the two divergent and incongruous periods - the old and the new, the Medieval and the Renaissance.

The fourteenth century was an age of vibrant political, social, religious and literary activity. Politically, the period was that of the "Hundred Years War". The war strengthened the sense of patriotism both in England and France. As victories in crucial wars were the achievement of the yeoman, the middleclass sprang into ascendancy. The power gradually was grabbed by the middle class from the nobility. The English Parliament came into prominence.

The spirit of democracy spread like wild fire. The expansion of trade and commerce and the springing up of new towns led to the middle class becoming the repository and storehouse of power which hastened the decline of the old feudal system. The great plague of 1348, which caused a heavy loss of human beings wielded a tremendous influence in exempting the labouring classes from the bonds of serfdom. The epidemic aggravated the peasant problem by reducing the supply of labour. The price of labour rose and the attempts by the authorities to restrain soaring wages of labour by legislation simply added fuel to fire. The labourers were annoyed, and the dissatisfaction exploded like a volcano in the bloody Peasant's Revolt of 1381. The revolt, though suppressed by King Richard II, exerted a lasting influence on the temper of the lower classes, fostering in them a spirit of independence.

The age of Chaucer witnessed a rapid growth in trade and commerce. England became commercially important.

Women were thought inferior to men. Most of the women of the lower strata of society were illiterate. The ladies of the higher society displayed an excess of delicacy and decorum.

Child marriage was in vogue among the rich and wealthy. Richard II himself married the child daughter of the King of France.

In the domain of religion, the papacy became the stronghold of profligacy, vices and corruption. In 1378 Europe

saw two rival popes, each casting slur upon the other. England supported Urban VI, the Pope of Rome, while France was behind Clement VII of Avignon. The schism shattered the sanctity of the Papal authority, and corruption in the church took the place of discipline. In this spiritual desert it was natural that there should appear prophets or reformers. Wycliffe, the morning star of the Reformation, launched the Lollard Movement to eradicate the evil from the church. Poets like Chaucer, Langland and Gower presented the naked, deplorable condition of the Papacy and its members. Chaucer's "Monk" is a worldly person who turns away from all his ecclesiastical services.

With regard to the literary activities, the Age of Chaucer witnessed the growth of the English language. The English language was standardised and the East Midland Dialect became the language of London and universities.

It was the work of Chaucer which made the dialect of London, the standard for future writers and the parent of Modern English. The foundation of English prose was also laid in this period.

The age saw outstanding and prominent writers. Wycliffe, the translator of the Bible, was a versatile and vigorous prose writer. In the field of poetry, Chaucer, Langland and Gower rendered meritorious services. The main literary forms developed in poetry were the allegory, the ballad, descriptive and narrative poems and metrical romances. New metres like the Rhyme Royal, Ottava Rima and Heroic Couplet came into fashion.

The age of Chaucer was a period of great activity in all walks of life. The age, with all its complexities, approximates the modern age. No wonder, Kittredge calls the period "a singularly modern time." R.K. Root in his *The Poetry of Chaucer* sums up the Age in the following words : "..... In its intellectual ferment the age had much the same character as the age of Elizabeth. There was the same glow of patriotism and national consciousness consequent upon a series of brilliant victories against a foreign foe ; there was the same spirit of revolt against a foreign church, and, though the forms of medievalism still survived, there was at work the same leaven of new ideas and of a new conception of life, reinforced by a new interest in the works of classical antiquity, coming over sea from Italy : literature and art were breaking away from the conventional, and under the influence of new models, was drinking again at the fountain - head of nature."

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340 - 1400)

Geoffrey Chaucer, the father of English Poetry, was born about the year 1340. His father, John Chaucer, was a wine merchant. Chaucer passed his boyhood in London, and it is certain that in his boyhood he had a fair acquaintance with Latin Grammar, rhetoric, logic, classical literature, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy.

In his teens, Chaucer was appointed in the service of Lionel, afterwards the Duke of Clarence. His marriage to Philippa Roet, sister to the wife of John of Gaunt, the influential Duke of Lancaster brought Chaucer closer to the Duke.

From 1370 to 1378 Chaucer was sent to foreign countries on diplomatic missions. In Italy he came into contact with Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, the leading men of letters. "From this Italinization," says Palgrave, "Chaucer derived a variety of range, a heightening style, an improvement he was honoured with an office to be filled by him." In 1379 Chaucer was appointed Controller of Customs at the port of London. During the last phase of his life, Chaucer was beset with economic difficulties. Chaucer died on October 25, 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, the first poet to occupy the "poet's corner" there.

The works of Chaucer

The poetical works of Chaucer are broadly divided into three classes corresponding to the three periods of his life.

French Period (1359-72)

The poems of this period were influenced by French masters such as Guillaume De Lorris and Jean De Meung. The main work of this period is *The Romance of the Rose* based on *Le Romaunt de la Ross* of Guillaume and Jean De Meung. The work was once entirely ascribed to Chaucer, but recent research has suggested that only the first part is his work. The other poems of this period are *Dethe of Blanche the Duchess* better known as the *Boke of the Duchesse*, *Complaynte to Pite* and *A.B.C.*

Italian Period (1373-86)

In 1372 Chaucer went to Italy, on a diplomatic mission. There, he came into personal contact with Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. The chief works of this period are *Troilus and Creseyde* based on Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, *The House of Fame*, *The Legende of Good Women*, *Anelida and Arcite* and *The Parlement of Foules*.

The English Period (1386-1400)

Chaucer's monumental work and masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, belongs to this period. Chaucer was indebted to Boccaccio for the general ideas and plan of the *Tales*. Leaving aside Chaucer's own *Tale of Melibeus* and *The Parson's Tale*, which are narrated in prose, all others are presented in heroic couplet.

Chaucer as the mouthpiece of his age

sion. There, he came into personal contact with Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. The chief works of this period are *Troilus and Creseide* based on Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, *The House of Fame*, *The Legende of Good Women*, *Anelida and Arcite* and *The Parlement of Foules*.

The English Period (1386-1400)

Chaucer's monumental work and masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, belongs to this period. Chaucer was indebted to Boccaccio for the general ideas and plan of the *Tales*. Leaving aside Chaucer's own *Tale of Melibeus* and *The Parson's Tale*, which are narrated in prose, all others are presented in heroic couplet.

Chaucer as the mouthpiece of his age

Chaucer represents his own age and holds the mirror to the life of his time. He is truly the social chronicler of England in the late 14th century. His poetry reflects the 14th century not in fragments but as a complete whole. Chaucer gives us a direct transcription of reality and a true picture of daily life as it was lived, in its most familiar aspects. Chaucer symbolises the Middle Ages, and his world is medieval. But beneath the medievalism, the leaven of the Renaissance is already at work, and the poet stands at the dividing of ways, linking himself with the old world of medievalism that was passing away and heralding the birth of the new age that was peeping at the horizon.

Religious condition of Chaucer's time

Chaucer presents the religious conditions of his time by creating ecclesiastical characters in *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer realistically presents the fatty degeneration that had set in the religious life of the times. The clergymen, instead of devoting their time and energy to religious meditation and redemption of fallen souls, had given themselves up wantonly to profligacy and epicureanism. Chaucer's "Monk" is a fat well-fed individual who is drawn towards hunting than to the performance of his religious duties. The "Friar" is a depraved fellow, for he knows all the town taverns and every innkeeper and bar-maid better than the lepers and beggar-women. The "Franklin" is a pleasure seeker and enjoys drinking and fine eating. The "Summoner" and the "Pardoner" are traders in religion selling religious pardon to those who seek their blessing for money. Chaucer presents these religious figures of his times in their true colours and thereby he realistically provides a peep into the religious conditions of his age.

Chaucer's contribution to English language and versification

Chaucer's contribution to English language and versification was immense. In 1360 English was split into four dialects. Chaucer popularised, reshaped and reformed the East Midland dialect and gave it the form of the standard tongue. He imparted to his native tongue smoothness and suppleness which it had not known since the Norman times and breathed into this dialect a highly poetical style.

Chaucer made substantial contribution in the sphere of versification too. He cast aside alliteration and doggerel rhyme, and employed three principal metres: the eight syllable line rhyming in couplets as in *The Book of the Duchess*, the ten-syllable line also rhyming in couplets as in *The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, and the same line arranged in seven-line stanzas (known as "rhyme royal") as in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The heroic couplet he introduced in English verse; the rhyme royal he invented.

Chaucer's place in English literature

Chaucer was fitted by both natural genius and the circumstance of his life to become the most technically accomplished, the most widely ranging, and the most universally appealing of the medieval English writers. He was the first great English poet, who combined the French and Italian streams of literature and brought forth a type of poetry unrivalled in its sunny atmosphere and realism. He was one of the finest of literary artists and his services to the English language, metre and diction were immense. Chaucer alone was to England nearly all that Boccaccio and Froissart, Petrarch and Dante were to Italy about the same period.

Other poets of the age of Chaucer

John Gower (1330 ? -1408)

Gower occupies an important position in the development of English literature. He was called "moral Gower" for his propensity for didacticism.

Gower's three works are in French, Latin and English. His first poem, *Speculum Meditantis* is in French,

the second, *Vox Clamantis* in Latin and the third, *Confessio Amantis*, was written in English. This diversity in the choice of language shows clearly the opinion of the age that English was not the one single instrument of literary expression.

William Langland (1332 ? -1400)

William Langland's best-known work is *The Vision Concerning Piers the Plowman*. Langland was the greatest satirist of the 14th century and in method and style he followed the example of Juvenal, the famous Roman

satirist. *Piers the Plowman* is the first satirical composition in English language which can claim a place of pre-eminence among the satirical works of English literature. The whole work is a commentary upon life and death and it embodies a running satire on the world. Primarily the work is a satire on the conditions of life prevalent in the 14th century, but, incidentally, it is also a satirical exposure of the weaknesses and foibles of human nature in general which survive to the present day.

Langland, as a satirist, did not advocate radical reforms like the social reformers of the age. He was moral at heart and wanted all classes of people to tread on the path of virtue and morality.

Characteristics of the poetry of the 14th Century

Love of Allegory

Allegory predominates the poetry of this age. Chaucer's poetry in French and Italian periods is allegorical, so is Langland's *Vision of Piers the Plowman*.

Didacticism

Didactic tone is present in Langland's *Piers the Plowman* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Gower was known as "moral Gower". Chaucer seeks to get out of the didactic hold, but he too is not free from the general tendency of moralising.

Realism

The poetry of the age represents the social, political, religious and economic life of the age. Langland exposes corruption in the church in fierce tone. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* paints almost all classes of people excluding the highest and the lowest.

Satiric tone

The poetry of the age is coloured by the tone of satire, fierce and biting in Langland, mild and gentle in Chaucer. Corruption in the church and clerical order were generally satirised by the poets of this age.

Spirit of morality

The spirit of morality and religion governed the poetry of this age. Langland expressed the religious and moral tone of the age more vigorously than Chaucer.

Story telling

Gower popularised the love-story in **Confessio Amantis**, and Chaucer gave a new life and vigour to story telling in **The Canterbury Tales**.

Humour

The note of genial and urban humour is Chaucer's contribution to the poetry of this age.

Versification

In Langland we have the predominance of alliteration, and *Piers the Plowman* is the last work in alliterative verse. Chaucer employed three principal metres - the eight syllable line as in *The Book of Duchess*; the ten syllable line as in the *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* and the "Rhyme Royal" as in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

14TH CENTURY PROSE

The dawn of the 14th century witnessed a change in the formation of English prose and prose style. After the Black Death, English, instead of French, was adopted as the medium of instruction and it was left to certain writers of the 14th century to give to the English language the new place which it was to occupy in the years to come (Latin was generally the official language and French, the medium of polite intercourse). Prose literature of the 14th century is almost negligible when we compare it with the verse of the same time. Its bulk is so small and its literary quality so slight that it is hardly of value except as giving information about the period.

Geoffrey Chaucer

Chaucer's prose works are *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, the translation of *Boethius*, *The Parson's Tale*

and *The Tale of Melibeus*. Chaucer's prose has qualities that make a good writer. It attains loftiness in such passages as those in which philosophy appears to Boethius in his prison, or passages showing precision and exactness and swiftness.

John Wycliffe (1320 ? -1384)

Wycliffe translated the New Testament into the vulgar tongue. The translation was made from the Latin Vulgate, not from the original Greek and Hebrew. The translation laid down the national standard of English prose. But, the transla-

tion of Wycliffe was faulty, as it abounded in Latin constructions.

Sir John Mandeville

In England, there appeared about the year 1356 an extraordinary book called *The Voyages and Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, written in excellent style in the Midland dialect which was then becoming the literary language of England. For years this interesting work and its unknown author were subjects of endless dispute. Sir John Mandeville was considered a Frenchman. The original work (a compilation from Marcopolo and other sources) was translated into Latin, and later into English and other languages. It is the first book of belles lettres (/ 'bei'letr / literary studies and writings) in English prose. Sir John's observation about life and manners of the people gives interest to the book.

Edward Albert sums up the achievement of prose doing this time in these words :

"The state of prose is still immature, the everyday writing of the age shows a vigour and clarity which are a great advance on the mingled French and English writing of the beginning of the period, when English was still struggling to shake off the dominance of French. Wycliffe's prose is unpolished, though it can be pointed and vigorous. Mandeville's prose style, though it is devoid of artifices, attains to a certain distinction by reason of its straightforward methods, its short and workmanlike sentences, and a brevity rare in his day."

- ❑ The Peasant's Revolt took place in the year
 - 1381
- ❑ Who is regarded as the Morning Star of Reformation ?
 - John Wycliffe
- ❑ The Lollard Movement was started by
 - John Wycliffe
- ❑ What was the most prominent dialect during Chaucer's time ?
 - East Midland
- ❑ Name the work of Chaucer which is based on Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*
 - *Troilus and Creseyde*
- ❑ To whom is Chaucer indebted for the general plan of his *Canterbury Tales* ?
 - Boccaccio
- ❑ Chaucer is credited with the introduction of a pattern of versification which later formed a distinguishing aspect of the neo-classical poetry. Name the verse form considered here.
 - Heroic Couplet
- ❑ John Gower, the poet, was called Moral Gower because of his
 - didactic nature
- ❑ Among Gower's poems, *Speculum Meditantis*, *Vox Clamantis* and *Confessio Amantis*, which was written in English ?
 - *Confessio Amantis*
- ❑ Name the poem which is regarded as the first satirical composition in English Language.
 - William Langland's *Piers the Plowman*.

