

GEOFFREY CHAUCER AND ENGLISH REALISM

PLAN:

1. The Literature of the 14th century.
2. Geoffrey Chaucer is the founder of the English literature.
3. “The Canterbury Tales” is masterpiece of Geoffrey Chaucer.
4. Literature of the 15th century.
5. Robin Hood ballads.

In the 14th century the Norman Kings made London their residence. It became the most populous town in England. The London dialect was the central dialect, and could be understood throughout the country.

There appeared poor priests who wandered from one village to another and talked to the people. They protested not only against rich bishops but also against churchmen who were ignorant and could not teach people anything. Poets and priests William Langland and John Wyclif were among them.

William Langland(1332 – 1400). His name is remembered for a poem he wrote, “The Visions of William Concerning Piers the Ploughman”. The poem is called “Piers Plowman”.

In “Piers Plowman” Vice and Virtue are spoken of as if they were human beings. The poem was very popular in the Middle ages.

John Wyclif(1320 – 1384) He is remembered because he discussed political questions with the common people in the common tongue, and because he translated the Bible into English.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER.

Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the greatest poet in English literature. He was born in London (1340 – 1400). His service in that household indicates that his family had sufficient social status for him to receive a courtly education. In 1366 Chaucer married PhilippaRoet, a ladyin – waiting to the Queen. Chaucer rose socially through his marriage. In 1368 he became one of the King’s esquires, which in those days meant that he worked in the administrative department of the King’s government.

Chaucer’s poetry is generally divided into three periods.

The first. French period. Chaucer came in contact with French literature, his earliest poems were written in imitation of the French romances. He translated from French a famous allegorical poem of the 13th century.

The second. Italian period. In Italy he became acquainted with Italian life and culture, with the classical authors and with the newer Italian works.

Chaucer’s own writing, the French models of his earliest years gave way to this Italian influence. To the Italian period can be assigned “The

House of Fame”, “The Parliament of Fowls”, and “Troilus and Cressida”.

The third, English period. After his return to London, Chaucer became a customs official at the port of London. And began composing his masterpiece “The Canterbury Tales”.

He died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey in a section, which later became established as the Poet’s Corner.

“THE CANTEBURY TALES”.

“The Canterbury Tales” is a long poem made up of general introduction and twenty four - stories, told in verse. Chaucer draws a rapid portrait of thirty men and women thus showing his characters. Chaucer himself and a certain Harry Bailly, the host of a London inn are among them. Harry Bailly proposes the following plan: each pilgrim was to tell two stories on the way to the shrine and two on the way back.

Chaucer introduces each of his pilgrims in the prologue, and then he lets us know about them through stories they tell.

Chaucer’s contribution to English literature is usually explained by the following:

1. “The Canterbury Tales” sum up all types of stories that existed in the Middle Ages.

2. He managed to show different types of people that lived during his time and through these people he showed a true picture of the life of the 14th century.

3. Chaucer was the creator of a new literary language. He chose to write in the popular tongue that is in English language.

4. Chaucer was by learning a man of the Middle Ages, but his attitude towards mankind was so broad – minded that his work is timeless.

LITERATURE OF THE 15th CENTURY.

Folk poetry flourished in England and Scotland in the 15th century. The most interesting examples of folk poetry were the ballads. Ballads and songs expressed the sentiments and thoughts of the people. The art of printing did not stop the creation of folk – songs and ballads. They continued to develop till the 18th century.

The original authors of ballads are unknown; a given ballad may exist in several versions, because many different people told and revised the ballad as it travelled from village to village.

“THE WIFE OF USHER’S WELL”

There lived a wife at Usher’s Well,
And a wealthy wife was she;
She had three stout and stalwart sons,
And sent them o’er the sea.

They hadna' been a week from her,
A week but barely ane,
When word came to the carlin wife
That her three sons were gane.

They hadna' been a week from her,
A week but barely three,
When word came to the carlin wife
That her sons she'd never see.

I wish the "wind may never cease,
Nor fashes in the flood,
Till my three sons come hame to me,
In earthly flesh and blood".

Thus, the folk ballad is a popular literary form. The ballad tends to express its meaning in simple language.

Some folk ballads make use of refrains, repetitions of a line or lines in every stanza without variation. Refrains add emphasis and a note of continuity to the ballads.

As regards to content, the ballads are usually divided into three groups: historical, heroic, and romantic ballads. Historical ballads were based on a historical fact, while heroic ballads were about people who were persecuted by the law or by their own families.

Among the most popular ones were those about Robin Hood, Who was an outlaw.

ROBIN HOOD BALLADS.

The Robin Hood ballads, numbering some forty separate ballads, were written down at various times not earlier than the 14th and 15th centuries. Robin Hood is partly historical, partly legendary character. He lived in the second half of the 12th century, during the reign of Henry II and his son Richard I. The older ballads tell us much about the Saxon yeomen, who were famous archers and keen hunters. Being ill treated by the Norman robber – barons, they longed to live free in the forest with Robin as their leader.

Robin Hood always helped the country folk in their troubles. Though sheriff put a big price on Robin's head, Saxons didn't betray him.

Thus, Robin was an outlaw and lived in Sherwood Forests. He was smart and clever "with a twinkle in the eye". Whenever the Sheriff or the king sent out a party of men to catch him, Robin fought with so much vigour that his enemies, amazed at his bravery, confessed themselves beaten and stayed with him in the forest.

They became "the merry men of Robin Hood".

In the 16th century many new episodes were introduced into the ballads. They were arranged in series, the most popular of which was “The Jolly Life of Robin Hood and his Men in Sherwood”.

QUESTIONS:

1. Into how many periods can Geoffrey Chaucer’s literary work be divided?
2. In what period was Chaucer’s famous “The Canterbury Tales” written?
3. What groups of English ballads do you know?
4. What is the English literature of the 15th century characterized by?
5. What features of Robin Hood’s character attracted the people most of all?
6. What kinds of ballads do you know?

KEY – WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS:

1. Ignorant
2. Pilgrimage
3. Predecessor
4. Historical character
5. Legendary character