



MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE AND SOCIETY: FAITH, CHIVALRY, ALLEGORY, AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT-----

Middle English Literature emerges after the Norman Conquest 1066. It includes multiple varieties in it. It's an innovative blend of religious subjects, medieval chivalric metrical romances, and love themes. Satire also prevails in the literary works. Due to the Norman invasion Latin and French influences on literature are prominently seen in the contemporary period. The literature of the contemporary medieval time has its unique essence and deep impact on the readers. The didactic way of storytelling and the usage of allegorical references have elevated the standards of writing and the excellence of contemporary English Literature. This innovative way of writing has spread knowledge widely about the social, religious, political and literary spheres of the time among the readers.

KEY WORDS: *Religious, Christian, Didactic, Faith, Allegory, Analogy, Society, Politics, Hypocrisy, Chivalry, Medieval-----*

METHODOLOGY

The study follows close reading of all the texts. The textual, analytical and interpretative study helps in the deeper understanding of the Middle English literature and its unique features. The historical-contextual and thematic analytical approaches provide a profound wisdom, clarity and detailed understanding of the contemporary society, religion and the chivalrous attitudes of that time.

Major Characteristics of Middle English Literature

- Due to the dominance of the Church religious, moral and didactic works appear in literature specially the stories of Bible and the lives of the saints are taught to common people
- Medieval chivalric romances, the stories of moral and courageous knights prevail in the literature of this time.
- The dominance of English Language emerges after the Norman and French languages. The arrival of English language comes into prominence.
- Oral tradition of storytelling was a common feature of this time.

Major Medieval Literary works

- ***Canterbury Tales (c. 1387–1400): Geoffrey Chaucer-*** is a social documentary of the 14th-century medieval English society portrayed minutely by the great Morning Star of the English Renaissance /Father of English Poetry Geoffrey Chaucer. It talks about 29 pilgrims who are in a religious journey to visit the shrine of St. Thomas Becket. The pilgrims belong to the different strata of the society. All the pilgrims take shelter in the Tabard Inn under the humble hostage of Harry Bailey. He is a high spirited man with authoritative and leadership attributes. He proposes the pilgrims to tale 4 stories during their travel to Canterbury to connect the group of people and provide a familial connection between them. He even assures to provide a free supper as a reward to the best storyteller.

Characters in the Canterbury Tales

Among the characters there are -the Nobility Section –in this section belong *The Knight, the Squire and the Yeoman*. *The Knight* is a courageous, wealthy gentle man belongs to the highest strata of the society. He is the first story teller and an admirable and a true gentleman. The squire is a romantic young person. The Yeoman is a humble and practical person. He is clad in green and has achieved expertise in archery.

Madame Eglantine, the Prioress is an excessively refined woman often communicates in French and has a nasal tone. She is full of showmanship and is more flamboyant rather than spiritual. *The Monk* is a thoroughly hypocritical person with severe disloyalty to his sacred profession. This fat, bald man is fond of hunting and in sophisticated dress up. He shuns the ordeal and asceticism of his profession. Through him Chaucer shows the hypocrisy of medieval clerical occupation. *The Friar, Huberd*, a mendicant, highly commercial minded person takes confessions



from wealthy fellow for high price and spent the money on him rather than on the poverty –ridden section of the society. *The Summoner*, an ugly and red faced fellow, a money-minded person, who calls people to get rid of their sins, take bribe from people and is himself a thoroughly morally corrupt person. The Pardoner is also a corrupted and completely hypocritical fellow; he sells indulgences and is full of gluttony. *The Parson* is a virtuous country priest. *The Plowman* is a charitable, good- hearted and hard working human being. *Robyn, the Miller*, is a dishonest, money-minded and immoral person. *Roger, the cook*, is a skilful and expert person but is very unhygienic. *The Man of law or the sergeant of the law* is an affluent person, he spends much on himself. He is a shrewd legal representative and seems busier than actual. He is a materialistic person and serves as a judge in the court of the assizes. *The Franklin* is a pleasure seeking or epicurean landowner. *The Reeve*, Oswald is a materialistic, manipulative, skinny, bald person of a large estate and gains profit repeatedly through his cunning actions. *The Physician*, the gold lover and gold digger is a devout follower of astrology. *The Shipman* is from Dartmouth, is an expert and a pirate. *Alisoun, the Wife of Bath*, is an experienced married person and a widow having five husbands in her life. She is thoroughly bold and assertive in her action, appearance and speech.

Main Themes of the Canterbury Tales:

- Through the characters Chaucer has exposed the hypocrisies of medieval society in the different sections of the society especially in the clerical section and in the reputed posts of the Church and among the professionals of the various occupations of the society.
- The society was divided into three prominent categories- the nobility, the clergy and the peasantry.
- Corruption prevails in the Church and amidst the dignified and responsible post holders and professionals.
- There is a huge contrast between the characters’ real selves and in their appearances.
- Characters are full of universal human qualities. Love, mercy and kindness go simultaneously with envy, greed, gluttony and showmanship.
- Hypocrisy is a prominent theme among some of the major characters like prioress, monk
- Sex and adultery, moral weakness is shown distinctively in the Wife of Bath.
- The concepts of competition and triumph of the winner is demonstrated in the Story telling contest and the free supper from the Host.
- Women play the dominant role in their relationships through wit and sexual attributes. The freedom of speech, thought and decision making is shown in the character of the women. The freedom to choose partners is also demonstrated through the character of The Wife of Bath.
- Both the physical and emotional loves are shown through the portrait of the characters and the stories.
- The religious and social concepts like self restrain, immorality, debauchery, sin, confession and redemptions are shown in the characters and in the social and religious structures. It shows human folly, self-realization and the path of redemption through the existing religious structures and procedures.
- Allegory is a special tool of the contemporary writers to bring out the deeper meaning of the themes.
- Allegory, analogy, moral lessons and beast fables are common concepts for the usage of contemporary literature.
- Literature was mainly didactic. It is the form of edutainment. Instruction of religious and Christian doctrines and moral values are the main attention of the writers.
- To make people aware of for spirituality and salvation was a crucial theme of the writers. Religious themes like sin, redemption, salvation are widely talked about.
- Civic manners are shown for civilized people. The knights evoke the sense of courage, bravery in common people and try to influence the nation holistically.
- Faith and reason are connected in the texts.
- Dream vision is a common feature of these medieval works.
- ***The Nun's Priest's Tale*** – This is a beast fable which is a vital part of The Canterbury Tales. It is didactic in theme. It is written as a mock-heroic literary work. The moral of the story is *never trust a flatterer*. The proud rooster Chauntecleer ignores the prophecy in his nightmare about his impending trouble. His wife Pertelotealso also dismisses it as an effect of indigestion. Don Russell, *a col-fox, ful of sly iniquitee*, the cunning fox appears abruptly and starts flattering the vainglorious rooster to sing a song with closed eyes. The boastful Chauntecleer adhered to his instruction and starts singing forgetting about the prediction completely. He is being snatched by the wicked Russell but later he is capable of escaping from this deadly trap by his ready wit. It instructs not to indulge pride and flattery.



- **Piers Plowman: William Langland-** It is a famous allegorical poem. The poem is an earnest longing for the true Christian life with the utmost devotion and faith in the religion. The three ideologies or stages will be the guiding force for the devotee towards his path of spiritual elevation, enlightenment and redemption. These are Dowel or do well, Dobet which implies do better and Dobest means do the best. The piece is a quest of a humble dreamer to attain spirituality.

Major Themes

- Corruption pervades widely in the religious sectors in the Church among the clerics. The selling of indulgences is an important example of this immoral practice.
- The poem urges for doing good works for the sake of others and for the sake of humanity which will eventually leads to the elevation of the human soul. Indeed the core truth of every religion is “be good and do good to others”.
- Love, kindness, mercy, penance and repentance are the religious path for salvation.
- Langland protested against the social injustices and inequalities of the class system. Class discrimination is a condemnable social practice which should be eradicated to establish a righteous social system with a certain standard of equality from the monarchy to the peasantry.
- Piers do his work with utmost seriousness and sincerity. To create a healthy and prosperous society everyone should be honest to their works and they have to execute their performances responsibly. Work should be regarded as worship.
- Human beings should not indulge in idleness.
- Man should live and lead his life in a dignified way and they should have faith in God.
- The human life is a divine blessing. It is given to attain complete surrendering to God and to serve others.

Here in this enriched literary piece Piers the Plowman is a simple worker who through his dedication, selflessness, patience and penance will attain the Christ like stature.

- **Le Morte d'Arthur (1485): Sir Thomas Malory-** This is a remarkable medieval literary work. It records the rise and fall of King Arthur. The text is pervaded with chivalry, gallantry, courtly love, treachery and tragic doom. It pivots around the romantic love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. The literary piece is at once personal and universal. There is stark contrast between personal ambitions, desires and the ambition of the formation of an ideal and faultless society.

Major Themes

- Malory appreciates and upholds the ideologies of Knighthood, which are chivalry, bravery courageousness and indomitable spirit. The admirable knights try their utmost to establish these moral foundations in the society but often fail to fulfill their expectations.
- The passionate and irresistible longing of the Knight Lancelot and Queen Guinevere becomes the curse for the Arthurian kingdom as it ruthlessly destroys the trust of the King and therefore gives the fatal blow in the downfall and crashing down of the empire. The illicit love affair has devastated both the King and the Kingdom mercilessly. The moral structure of the Arthurian Kingdom was built on faith and loyalty but it has crushed down due to the treachery of Mordred and distrust and lack of loyalties among the knights.
- The tragedy culminates in the destruction and devastation of the ideal Arthurian Empire and the demise of the legendary King Arthur.
- The spiritual quest for the Holy Grail transcends all the earthly and materialistic desires.
- Multiple feuds and disputes take place therefore devastating the unity in the court.
- **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:** This Middle English text is enriched with chivalry, knighthood, moral ethics, nature, civilization etc. Gawain is the protector of reputation and the representative of the code of Chivalry in Arthurian court. Gawain fails slightly in front of the Green Knight due to fear despite of his nobility and courage. Camelot represents the artificiality while the world of Green Knight is full of natural abundance and the untamed wild natural aesthetic beauty which makes the ambience charming and magical. Sir Gawain is able to realize and accept his flaws. Despite the unattainable perfection one must thrive for it. Gawain has dealt with the fear of mortality and temptations. The courtly perfection has clashes with the human follies which culminate with the acceptance of the limitation of human perfection and to achieve maturity and knowledge from the moral lacunae to progress in the journey of higher achievements and spiritual enlightenment.



- **The Owl and the Nightingale:** This is a valuable piece of Literature of the medieval era. This is burning and flying debate between the two birds. The two birds represent two different ideologies and perspectives of their own. This is a social satire presented in a humorous way.
- The nightingale is a frivolous and jovial bird where the owl is a wise and somber bird. The Nightingale represents joy, aesthetics, happiness, romance, spring and love whereas the owl stands for seriousness, contemplation, profundity, wisdom and struggle and hardships of life.
- The owl protects and instructs the lovers whereas the Nightingale provides love and joy to them. Both the birds have their unique utilities.
- The nightingale is associated with amorous and passionate love. It also encourages in sinful and adulterous relationships. On the contrary, the owl is associated with somberness, gloom and death.
- The nightingale represents the elitist and courtly gestures and their perspectives while the Owl stands for the pragmatic commoners.

Nightingale	Owl
Frivolous and jovial	Wise and somber
Aesthetics, happiness, romance, spring and love	Seriousness, contemplation, profundity, wisdom
Provides love and joy to the lovers	Protects and instructs them
Sinful and adulterous relationships	Somberness, gloom and death
Elitist and courtly gestures	Pragmatic commoners
Beauty	Brain
Heart	Head

Both the birds often fail to stand firmly for what they are representing. They ultimately go to Master Nicholas of Guildford to get instruction and to get a proper judgment of this debate.

- **The Ormulum (c. 1150–1180)** – This is 12th Century composition of religious Biblical homilies. The writer of this celebrated homily collection is Orm, an Augustinian canon. The Biblical exegesis contains 19000 lines. It uses early Middle English verse. This is rich in philological and linguistic grounds; it records the detailed elaboration of many English pronunciations. It contains the phonemic orthography. This is a great asset of English Literature and language as it records the development process of English language during the Norman Conquest of England. Orm himself has greatly influenced in the development of the English spelling system. The text assists enormously in the pronunciations of the English vowels and helps in the understanding of the English vernacular. Besides it provides Gospel sermons for educational purpose and pastoral care.
- **Pearl:** This is the celebrated 14th Century Middle English Dream Poem. It may be the work of the renowned Gawain poet. A mourning father has visualized his deceased two years old baby girl, Pearl in a bright celestial landscape. The girl after her death has transformed into a celestial being and now consoles his father not to mourn her death as he has transformed into Christ’s bride which is a common earthly idea. The father visualizes in his dream the New Jerusalem and his dream abruptly breaks while crossing the river. The poem gives the profound concept of afterlife and the journey of the soul to the next birth in heavenly abode. It transfers the earthly sorrow into divine contentment and the transitory earthly existence into everlasting divine presence. The literary piece is charged with Spiritual enlightenment.

CONCLUSION

Thus medieval English Literature is enriched with rich allegory, thematic excellence, and didactic way of presenting the stories. The literary works of the medieval period have helped a lot in the enrichment of English literature and the progression of English language. This period has shown the prominence of English writing. English emerges as the tool for expressing precious thoughts of the authors to the widespread readers. Medieval English Literature has created its unique place in the history of the world.

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