

MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD: GEOFFREY CHAUCER AND HIS AGE

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Abstract: *The Middle English period (approximately 1066–1500) represents one of the most significant stages in the development of English language and literature. During this era, English underwent profound linguistic, social, and cultural transformations influenced by the Norman Conquest and the gradual emergence of a distinct English identity. Among the literary figures of this period, Geoffrey Chaucer occupies a central position. Often referred to as the "Father of English Literature", Chaucer played a crucial role in establishing English as a literary language. His masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, provides a vivid portrayal of fourteenth-century English society while demonstrating remarkable literary innovation. This paper examines the historical background of the Middle English period, Chaucer's life and works, the characteristics of his age, and his lasting contribution to English literature.*

Keywords: *Middle English, Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, medieval literature, English language, fourteenth century.*

Introduction

The history of English literature is commonly divided into several major periods: Old English, Middle English, Renaissance, Neoclassical, Romantic, Victorian, Modern, and Contemporary literature. Among these periods, the Middle English era serves as a bridge between the Anglo-Saxon tradition and the flowering of English literature during the Renaissance. The Middle English period witnessed considerable social, political, religious, and linguistic changes. The Norman Conquest of 1066 introduced French culture and language into England, fundamentally transforming English society. By the fourteenth century, English had re-emerged as the dominant language of the people, creating favorable conditions for literary development. It was in this historical context that Geoffrey Chaucer emerged as the most influential literary figure of the age. Through his poetry and narrative skill, Chaucer elevated English literature to a new level and laid the foundations for future generations of writers.

The beginning of the Middle English period is generally associated with the Norman Conquest in 1066. After defeating King Harold II at the Battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror became the ruler of England.

The Norman rulers brought with them the French language and culture. Consequently:

- French became the language of the court.
- Latin remained the language of religion and scholarship.

- English continued to be spoken by common people.

This linguistic diversity significantly influenced the vocabulary and structure of the English language.

The fourteenth century was marked by major social transformations:

- Growth of towns and trade.
- Rise of the middle class.
- Decline of feudalism.
- Development of national consciousness.

These changes contributed to the emergence of a broader reading audience and encouraged literary production in English rather than Latin or French.

One of the most devastating events of the century was the Black Death (1348–1350). It killed a significant portion of England’s population and had profound economic and social consequences. Labor shortages increased the bargaining power of workers, weakening the traditional feudal system and contributing to social mobility.

The Middle English language differed considerably from Old English.

Important developments included:

- Simplification of grammar.
- Reduction of inflectional endings.
- Adoption of thousands of French words.
- Increased standardization of spelling and pronunciation.

Examples of French loanwords include:

government
justice
parliament
religion
beauty
literature

By Chaucer’s time, English had become sufficiently developed to serve as a sophisticated literary medium.

Geoffrey Chaucer was born around 1343 in London. His father was a prosperous wine merchant, providing Chaucer with opportunities for education and social advancement.

Little is known about his formal education, but his writings reveal extensive knowledge of:

Classical literature
French poetry
Italian literature
Philosophy
Theology

Chaucer served in various governmental positions:

Soldier

Diplomat

Customs officer

Clerk of royal works

His travels to France and Italy exposed him to continental literary traditions and greatly influenced his writing style. Throughout his life, Chaucer enjoyed the patronage of the English royal court. He spent his final years writing and revising his literary works. He died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey, where the famous Poets' Corner later developed.

Chaucer was influenced by several literary traditions.

French courtly literature introduced:

- Romantic themes
- Elegance of style
- Allegorical writing

One notable example is Roman de la Rose, which strongly influenced Chaucer's early works.

During his travels in Italy, Chaucer encountered the works of:

- Dante Alighieri
- Francesco Petrarch
- Giovanni Boccaccio

These writers inspired Chaucer's use of realism, characterization, and narrative complexity.

- Chaucer also drew upon ancient authors such as:
- Virgil
- Ovid
- Boethius

Their works enriched his intellectual and literary perspective.

The Book of the Duchess is one of Chaucer's earliest poems.

Characteristics:

- Dream vision format
- Elegiac tone
- Courtly themes
- Psychological depth

Troilus and Criseyde is often regarded as Chaucer's greatest completed work.

Themes include:

- Love
- Fate
- Betrayal
- Human suffering

The poem demonstrates Chaucer's mastery of narrative technique and character development.

The Parliament of Fowls combines political symbolism with romantic themes. It is notable for its imaginative portrayal of birds debating love and marriage. The House of Fame explores questions of truth, reputation, and artistic creation through allegory and satire.

Chaucer's masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, was written during the final years of his life. The work centers on a group of pilgrims traveling to Canterbury Cathedral. To entertain themselves during the journey, they agree to tell stories. Although Chaucer planned a much larger collection, only twenty-four tales were completed. The framework narrative allows Chaucer to present diverse perspectives through characters from different social classes.

The pilgrims include:

- Knight
- Miller
- Merchant
- Doctor
- Lawyer
- Monk
- Nun
- Wife of Bath
- Pardoner
- Parson

This diversity creates a rich panorama of medieval society. The tales portray every level of society, from nobility to peasants. Chaucer criticizes corruption within the Church while respecting genuine spirituality. Different tales offer contrasting views on relationships and gender roles. The work explores greed, pride, honesty, wisdom, and compassion.

The importance of *The Canterbury Tales* lies in:

- Realistic characterization
- Variety of genres
- Humor and satire
- Rich social commentary
- Use of vernacular English

The work remains one of the greatest achievements in world literature. Unlike many medieval writers, Chaucer portrayed people as complex individuals rather than symbolic figures. Chaucer frequently employed humor to expose social and religious hypocrisy. His satire is generally gentle rather than harsh, encouraging reflection rather than condemnation. One of Chaucer's greatest achievements is his ability to

create memorable characters. The descriptions in the General Prologue provide detailed portraits that reveal personality, profession, and social status. Chaucer chose to write primarily in English instead of Latin or French. The Church remained powerful but faced criticism for corruption and moral decline. Through literature, Chaucer documented these developments with remarkable insight.

More than six centuries after his death, Chaucer remains a central figure in English literary studies. Scholars recognize him as a writer who bridged medieval and modern literary traditions. His portrayal of human behavior remains relevant because it reflects universal aspects of life and society.

The Middle English period was a transformative era in the history of English language and literature. Political events, social changes, and linguistic developments created the conditions necessary for literary innovation. Within this context, Geoffrey Chaucer emerged as the most influential writer of his age. Through works such as *The Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The Book of the Duchess*, he demonstrated the expressive power of English and established new standards for literary excellence. Chaucer's realistic characterization, narrative skill, humor, and social insight distinguish him as one of the greatest writers in English literature. His legacy continues to inspire readers and scholars around the world, confirming his place as the Father of English Literature and a defining figure of the Middle English period.

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