

Block

1

CHAUCER & SPENSER

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

Chaucer: Life and Works

UNIT 2

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

UNIT 3

Spenser: Life and Works

UNIT 4

***Amoretti* Sonnets LVII, LXVII, LXXV**

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Cover Design by A.D.A. Graphics, New Delhi

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ISBN-

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Printed and published on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Open University by Director, SOH.

COURSE INTRODUCTION

British Poetry and Drama from 14th to 17th Century

Friends, this course will provide to you valuable information, ideas and approaches related to the English literary writing that emerged in the period ranging from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century. Broadly, the four centuries were witness to the crucial change that occurred in the domain of English culture; it pertained to the shift in concerns and interests. In fact, the change and shift we talk about defined this period as early modern—when the first signs of movement towards men and women in their material existence came up and drew attention. We are making reference here to the emphasis that the society of the previous centuries in England and the surrounding countries of Europe laid on God and divinity. In a region where the Church enjoyed supreme authority and power to direct life and nature, where it took upon itself the responsibility of organising and governing all matters of existence, and moulded the minds of men to serve a power beyond their control. To what end did men and women work, how did they think about the world surrounding them? These questions were answered by Christianity, the Church of Rome that was the seat of final authority and judgment. This did not leave any place for the creative thought, the act of culture where humans would enjoy the freedom to dream and imagine in their own distinct manner, as a matter of choice. Men and women lived a life of values, morality, ethics, justice, of virtues dictated to them by the supreme authority of religion. It was a static world, swearing by permanence. Human beings were symbols of the right conduct. This is the starting point of the discussion in this course.

Somewhere in the fourteenth century, signs of a new attitude emerged. No, humans were not means, they were not mere symbols. Instead, they were individuals and citizens with a sense of initiative. They were persons in flesh and blood, interacting with one another with purposes that clashed and created an environment of vitality and dynamism. What is a better example of this than the description of the fourteenth century ethos in the hands of Geoffrey Chaucer? He presented characters from the fourteenth century rooted in their cultural and ideological soil. Rightly, the first block in this course is devoted to Geoffrey Chaucer. You will read in this block about Chaucer's life and works that in turn are strong indicators of English society in that period. Additionally, you will be reading about people of the time imaginatively captured by poet Chaucer. He mixes in the portrayals his imagination and approach that work outside the parameters of religion. Yes, religion is present in the portrayals, but only as a pursuit; it comes in for analysis and comment by individuals who apply their minds to it and make sense of it in the context. Constantly, the said individuals take recourse to humour, satire and irony. On some occasions, they are annoyed or angry. For this reason, they move quite close to us today and become a subject of enquiry for us. Chaucer is truly a poet of human concerns and interests. In his approach, he is modern and human-centred. From here, the trend of poetic expression goes towards a different kind of writing in the sixteenth century when literary forms become yet more creative and experimental. Herbert Spenser typifies engagement with the world of nature and human fantasy. That is a continuation of as well as a departure from Chaucer. Like Chaucer earlier, Spenser in the sixteenth century is a major literary figure. It is interesting that he uses a new form, the sonnet form, to present short thematic representations. Imagine that with him and a few others, the sonnet form comes into its own and would become an established mode to run its course uninterrupted till the twentieth century. The first block of this course is aptly named "Chaucer and Spenser."

The second block is titled “Shakespeare and Donne.” It covers the two writers in some detail, the former with reference to his life and three sonnets, and the latter in the context of two of his poems. This block tells you how to read literary pieces under the socio-historical perspective, and consider the issue in terms of the opinions the writers held.

The third block has the title “Marlowe: *Dr. Faustus*.” It is on the path-breaking text of Marlowe’s play. The play belonged to the closing years of the sixteenth century; it brought out the sharp ideological conflicts of the age. The play is known for its use of the blank verse that replaced the rhymed verses employed for depiction in literary writing till then. The play is considered in its historical context.

The fourth and last block of this course offers an extensive analysis of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. It is a tragic play but in the block, emphasis is given on its political nature, too. You will also see that the witches in the play are not ghostly figures but women on the margins and compelled to leave society to take refuge in the forest. The multi-dimensional approach helps us absorb the complexity of the play’s theme.

We are sure that you would gain insights into literature’s varied aspects traced here under a critical plan by the course writers. Please see that the comments and assessments made in the four blocks are open-ended; they are meant to make you think and form your own impression about the works and authors discussed.

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Block 1: Chaucer and Spenser

In this block, you will read about England in the fourteenth century as well as the sixteenth century. To these centuries, poets Geoffrey Chaucer and Herbert Spenser belonged respectively. Chaucer confronted his society with a sense of criticism and amusement. It gave him a lot to wonder about. We use the Prologue to his famous “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” for explaining some important issues that engaged the minds of the people at the time. The foremost issue was of conflict between traditional moral principles and the common people seeking liberty and initiative. The wife of Bath, or the woman who came from the village named Bath, faced the question of fighting with the contemporary males. The latter were oppressive and extremely exploitative. This is made clear by Chaucer when he gives voice to the woman as she is arguing her case in the text. This apart, the block also offers a view of English society and culture in the fourteenth century.

The poet Spenser lived in sixteenth century England. At that time, England was being ruled by the Tudor Monarchs—primarily King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth. He came from a relatively humble background but rose to literary fame on the strength of his active imagination and creative genius. Unlike Chaucer who was a keen perceiver of social norms and values, Spenser engaged with concerns of beauty and sensuousness. In this block, we have a chance to look at some short poems written by him. They are in the sonnet mode—a literary form that restricts itself to fourteen lines of rhymed verse. In the poems selected for this block, Spenser shows an interaction between two human figures, the man and the woman enjoying fascination for each other. The background is of nature and gives the impression that the two human figures are indeed extensions of nature. The block also provides details of social life of the period necessary for visualizing the poet in the act of composing his verses.

UNIT 1 CHAUCER: LIFE AND WORKS

Structure

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- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Chaucer's Life and the Rich Backdrop of Life's Realities
- 1.3 Chaucer: Main Literary Works
- 1.4 Placing Chaucer in the Broad Literary Tradition of Europe
- 1.5 Chaucer's Humanism and Secular Outlook
- 1.6 Inter-twining of Society and Literature
- 1.7 Characteristics of Chaucer's Art and Vision
- 1.8 A View of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*
- 1.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.10 Questions
- 1.11 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall gain a view of the great English poet Geoffrey Chaucer. In this, we shall be assisted by information about the time he was born, the circumstances, social and cultural, that characterized the ethos of early medieval England, and the important literary works he composed. By way of seeking a pattern, we shall also take cognizance of the issues and concerns that engaged within his writing. This will finally form a background to the text, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" that we would focus upon for a detailed discussion.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

With Geoffrey Chaucer begins English literature in its bright and scintillating form. In his writing, we have glimpses of an extremely creative mind equipped with linguistic skills, musicality, deeper awareness of human character, and literary subtleties that would be envy of any modern-day writer. When he began writing, little was available to serve as a model to his expression. He directly and straightforwardly got his inspiration from his society that was multi-layered and difficult to comprehend. He found himself surrounded by the life at court, diplomacy entailing regular visits to other countries and coming to terms with manners and morals not familiar to him first hand. Thus, in writing he ploughed a lonely furrow. This was a gigantic task. However, Chaucer's writings wore his literary responsibilities light and made a virtue of his problems by dealing with them in a spontaneous sense. Whatever came his way, he tackled it. But this supposed literary vacuum was filled by the rich culture, myth and folklore that English life of the time enjoyed. Chaucer drew upon it in large measure and put forth works of unimaginable merit. As he proceeded along the path of creativity, he tried hand at narratives, dramatization, lyric, metaphor-rich description, character portrayal (later he became a model for presenting what were called pen-portraits) and legend. He was a social critic, too, in his representations but he would seldom be stark preachy or pin-pointing. His art consisted of suggestion, pause, understatement, light humour, and most important of all, irony. We do not have giants in the beginning of a literary tradition. In his case, however, the beginning was awe-inspiring. His versatility in playing with various forms says it all. For example, he wrote a long narrative in verse that could easily pass off as a novel. The reference is to *Troilus and Criseyde*.

1.2 CHAUCER'S LIFE AND THE RICH BACKDROP OF LIFE'S REALITIES

Geoffrey Chaucer was born sometime between 1340 and 1345 in London in the age of Edward Third. The date is not certain. The family in which he was born happened to be quite close to the court of the King and was familiar with the ways and manners of the country's upper stratum. Early in his career, he was taken into the service of the king as his valet, a high office in the royal palace at the time. In this, he might have been helped by the mother's family that enjoyed a superior position to the one his father came

from. In his late twenties, in 1370, he took part in diplomatic negotiations with the French and Italian kings. When he came back in 1374 from such important missions as a representative of the English royalty, he was appointed Controller of Customs and Subsidy of Wools, Skins, and Hides at the port of London. Another feather in his cap, among the many in his long and illustrious career, was the title of “Knight of the Shire of Kent” that he received in 1386. In the period following this, specifically in the last decade of the fourteenth century, he fell from favour of the high circle and saw difficult days and died in 1400.



Geoffrey Chaucer
(source: en.wikipedia.org)

Chaucer lived in the age of chivalry. What does this signify? For I.G. Handyside, he bore distinctions of “the magnificent court of Edward Third with knights and ladies, heraldry and tournaments, minstrels and poetry, music and story-telling” (Handyside, I.G. Ed. *Chaucer. The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*. London: Macmillan, 1987.8). In the description, each word stands for a special ethos at the centre of which existed spectacle, established convention, rules and regulations that assigned roles to all individuals in the frame. We may also recognize that impressive men and women surrounded by activities of pleasure were models of grandeur. The pleasure principle was rooted in games and the arts—singing groups, poetry recitations and story-telling were means of enjoyment. The life of the court in its totality resembled long series of celebrations and fanfare. The question is, how much of it would the young Chaucer have imbibed for his likely career as a poet. Two things from the list mentioned are prominent — poetry and story-telling. Indeed, these are the staple for poet Chaucer from the point of view of *The Canterbury Tales*. Even knights and ladies would have passed into the imagination of the poet who would constantly think of bringing them in, if the structure of *The Tale* permitted it. However, Chaucer was in the middle of a historical phenomenon that had a specific dynamic. The age could not hold the courtly life per se as a constant, since it required a system of production and distribution of necessities as well as wealth. Chaucer’s age could not survive without the peasant, the ploughman, the owner of farmlands, merchant, tradesman, and a host of petty official of the state in addition to the officialdom associated with religion. The court may appear oblivious of this important group of people looking after the physical and spiritual interests of society, but these could not be wished away in reality. We are constantly reminded of this fact as we read Chaucer’s works. The knowledge enabled the Father of Modern English Poetry to capture the surrounding scene in its representative essence and set a high benchmark for artistic-literary engagement.

1.3 CHAUCER: MAIN LITERARY WORKS

The background of courtly life and exposure to cultures in other countries gave Chaucer great communication skills and certain finesse. The life he had led gave him felicity in French and Italian and in both these languages, he composed poems. Because of being close to the life of the court, he had come

to represent the voice of urbanity that kept him away from the roughness and crudity characteristic of ordinary life in the countryside and the small towns. It goes to his credit though that in the final phase of his creativity, he shifted entirely to English for literary expression. This phase roughly began in the mid-eighties and continued till his death. His most mature and that which earned him lasting fame was *The Canterbury Tales* that he did not live to complete. He started writing this in 1386 and kept and continued with it in the nineties. The other important works written by him include *The Parliament of Fowls* (1375), *Troilus And Criseyde* (1382-5) and *The Legend of Good Women* (1386). But his writing started with a translated version of *Roman de la Rose* under the title *Romaunt of the Rose*. This may be called the main source of all that Chaucer wrote. The poem carried the dominant features of French romances current in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It would have been a stupendous task for Chaucer to render the spirit of French tradition of romances into the contemporary English idiom. Chaucer picked up or coined words of his own to suit the French expressions. The activity of translation became a ground for the English poet to evolve a style that came as near the English reader as possible; he saw the governing principle of allegory in French literature of the period. This meant that the narrative of the French source would work at two levels—one that saw nature, for instance, initially at the level of reality and the other at the level of what was understood as ‘personification.’ The spring coming after winter, a popular point of imaginative representation, would be described in its glory as a season but at the other level of a human figure it worked yet more sensuously. Personification of cold weather, a river, or a mountain gave immense scope to the writer to expand his meaning. This literary method was successfully emulated by young Chaucer and one could discern its role not just in the writing of the middle phase but also the most mature phase that started in mid-eighties of the fourteenth century. Finally, the element of personification would assume the proportions of allegory. It may thus be said that Chaucer borrowed from the French and to some extent the Italian tradition and enriched his vocabulary as well as the writing skills. In this context, it may be noted that *Roman de la Rose* was only a source and likewise the English translation of it were essentially the starting points of expression, not necessitating close adherence to the original text as became the convention in the later translation endeavour. Chaucer experimented greatly while composing his *Romaunt of the Rose* because of which it got an English character.

The rendering of *Roman de la Rose* in English also enabled Chaucer to give a new humanist orientation to his writing. The original book greatly satirized the Christian clerical practice of holiness and presented human emotions in the raw. There was a great deal of earthiness and crudity in the attitude of the writer of the French text. He was using fabliau to indulge in the carnal desire and entertain through it the audience tired of religious preaching. To this end, the writer would take to coarse expression and evoke the natural expressions of people in the countryside. For Chaucer, the same text became a source of evolving what may be termed materiality of human behaviour. The fables, too, came to be tempered for purpose of cultural uplift. The use of tales from the folklore and their imaginative interpretation to suit conditions in the fourteenth century played the big role of making Chaucer what he has been known for in English literature—the genius who laid the foundation of modernity and secular outlook in writing. Thus, coarseness and crudity of attitude in the French literary accounts of the day were transformed in the hands of Chaucer into a visionary presentation of the highest order.

Another work that comes close in literary value and appeal to *The Canterbury Tales* is the book *Troilus and Criseyde*. Its range is wide. Broadly looking like a poem, it has a strong narrative that pulls it in the direction of what much later came to be called a fictional work, a novel. Within the narrative, there is also the use of long as also short and crisp dialogues, as well as a set of well-crafted characters. In length, it may be an epic, but its thematic concerns being limited, it may fit into the category of a romance. Indeed, as a romance it flowers. This is when the happenings and events in it have a sense of immediacy and urgency even as the undertone is that of tragedy. All in all, it has the pattern of a novel. Its unique placing in the list of Chaucer’s works tells us about the depth of the author’s imagination. In rhymed verse and following a taut structure, *Troilus and Criseyde* shows to us the control and discipline that Chaucer exerted while giving shape to the vicissitudes that visited the two lovers, picked up from Homer.

Geoffrey Chaucer can be rightly called the Father of Modern Poetry that bore markings of the humanist outlook. Chaucer faced the medieval thought in a big way. He contended with ideas and principles rooted in tradition and were surrounded by myths that proposed an alternative view of human life closer to the past practices. Chaucer stood amused by the people of his time immersed in old beliefs. He understood their compulsions but also spotted specific distortions in their behaviour. They observed rituals on one side and felt tempted to break the shackles of morality on the other. The easy way for Chaucer would have been to criticise them for their duplicity and show them the supposedly right path. Instead of choosing this simple option, he went in the other direction of grasping the reality of their experience with open eyes. Why were they hypocritical, greedy, selfish or petty? Why were they men and women of the world rather than children of God and, therefore, potentially pious? It appears that in the second half of the fourteenth century when Chaucer lived, an ever-increasing gap could be seen between the religious and secular aspects. The former swore by the fixed norms of virtuous living and the latter took inspiration from the emerging ethos of life's necessities. The former sought guidance from the book and the latter from urges of the body. It could be called the cleavage between the soul and the mind.

As we pose the question of history being a decisive factor in the understanding of literary figures and works, we might think of the weakening feudalism at the back of Chaucer's modernity. Was that indeed the case? If yes, how did the change occur and what may have been the variants in view of which Chaucer's outlook was shaped? The issue will take us to the conscious role that Chaucer played in the making of his sensibility. Chris Harman has observed:

Writers such as Boccaccio, Chaucer, and, above all, Dante made a name for themselves by producing a secular literature written in their local idiom—and, in the process, gave it the prestige to begin its transition into a 'national' language. . . .

The lords grew ever more remote from the practicalities of producing the wealth they consumed. The descendants of the warriors in rough fortresses resided in elaborate castles, cloaked themselves in silk and engaged in expensive courtly and knightly rituals which asserted their superiority over other social groups. They regarded themselves as a class apart from everybody else, with hereditary legal rights sanctioned by sacred religious ceremonies. Within this caste, an elaborate gradation of ranks separated the great aristocrats from the ordinary knights who were legally dependant on them. But all its layers were increasingly disdainful of anyone involved in actually creating wealth—whether wealthy merchants, humble artisans or impoverished peasants. (Harman, Chris. fp. 1999, *A People's History of the World*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, rpt. 2010.146-7)

“Making a name” may be a colloquial use, but we do have in mind the power and influence that Chaucer wielded to attract attention of his contemporaries and those who followed. Writers are judged by their appeal. They also bring in questions of perception that may ruffle feathers of a few and inspire others to pick up hints and look at the world differently. The three writers mentioned in the quote are Boccaccio, Chaucer and Dante. Each made a dent in his respective culture and introduced a new trend.

1.5 CHAUCER'S HUMANISM AND SECULAR OUTLOOK

Harman talks of “secular literature” and “local idiom.” The time around the fourteenth century belonged to the religious mindset. People from the lower classes and groups to the higher ones accorded primacy to God and the institutions associated with the established faith. Add this to the norms that the idea of God and the existing institutions promoted. One important norm of the period was negation of individuality. Even as everyone had a name, things did not go much beyond it. The person bearing name looked for guidance towards the church, or towards the work s/he had to perform in life. Thus, categories such as artisan, prioress, merchant, and knight followed an unwritten but long established code of their professions. Were members falling under these categories have their own way to interpret practical stances? In answer, we might say that that was not considered significant or desirable. But around the time, members had started relating their acts to the day-to-day needs and practices that differed in each

case. Comparison of one's own act with that of another in the same category was a practice that occurred more frequently than before. We could call such a practice "secular," that which was rooted in the social circumstance and the perception accompanying it. Extend it to the person in the arena of religion where distinctness than uniformity was visible. One official of the church read the religious book in one way and the next one in an entirely separate manner. What we call hypocrisy became visible in actual cases and created doubts in the mind of the alert perceiver. This was perhaps the beginning of a trend rooted in the reality of the circumstance that was undergoing a rapid change. Chaucer's depiction of people and the atmosphere in which they operate reflects in clear terms. Why Chaucer alone? Many others also noticed the emergence of an alternative way of looking at the things around. One says this since a writer chooses to present such a phenomenon when it calls into question an established pattern. We, therefore, say that Chaucer's period compelled the keen observer of the social scene to take the mind away from religion or tradition and in the direction of doubt, inquiry and investigation.

The second aspect in the quote is that of "national language," and "local idiom." Clearly, the language of literature is the language of life. This could not be truer in the case of Chaucer who put to great use the vocabulary that was the means of communication at the level of the street. The local idiom was the core of the writing of his mature phase that belonged to the last decades of the fourteenth century. In the early period, Chaucer had written in French and Italian—he was well-versed in each. However, in the two languages, his eye would invariably remain stuck to the writers who had inspired him to take to the pen. There was a kind of standard he was supposed to follow, not a happy idea for one whose emotional content would draw him again and again to his surroundings. Yet, the problem with the current idiom nearer home was that it did not bear the weight of larger acceptance. Nonetheless, it was a literary issue and could be sorted out if the user of the idiom was creatively gifted to a high degree. This Chaucer had in ample measure—he possessed the capability to dramatize, to play with words, to draw a pen-portrait, and he could produce humour through the tone inherent in the idiom. By training, Chaucer was a person of courtly manners and had served the King as a diplomat of merit. He was widely travelled, too. Having been in contact with a whole variety of people, he was conversant with the habits of the privileged where subtlety and sophistication were in constant need. His quality of understanding men and morals being so high, he had a good ear for meaningful phrases as well as suggestive hints. For this reason, perhaps, he felt attracted to the common usage of words in his close surroundings. Particularly, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* gave him an occasion to delve deep into the nuances of speech as well as observe simplicity, devotion, hypocrisy, cunningness, courage, and assertiveness he marked the behaviour of the English people. Here was a treasure of human inventiveness that appealed to the poet in him in a new way. The venture of writing poetry in the local idiom enlarged his vocabulary no end; it connected him with concepts and ideas of the various regions from where those people came who held his attention and whom he would represent in his poetry. The variety of individuals who peopled his literary landscape helped him broaden his imaginative world that ran parallel to the one that surrounded him. Can we not say with some conviction that the effort of capturing such a great wealth of outlooks and attitudes through language would later evolve into creating a national language replacing others that were rooted in distant lands and climes?

1.6 INTER-TWINING OF SOCIETY AND LITERATURE

How social changes affect religion and people's mental states is described in the following passage that relates to the fourteenth century England:

The Black Death and the labour shortages that followed it served to exacerbate the long-standing social tensions between those who profited from the land and those who actually worked it. When in the revision of his Latin poem *Vox Clamantis* Gower introduced an allegorical description of wild peasant rabble rampaging through the land in the guise of beasts, his socially privileged first readers would readily have recognized his pointed and antipathetic reference to the traumatic Peasant's Revolt of the summer of 1381. This, the most concerted and disruptive popular revolt in English medieval history, had insistently and disconcertingly pressed home the question first

raised by popular preachers: ‘When Adam dalf (delved) and Eve span / Who was then a gentleman?’ The imposition of a vastly unpopular poll-tax on the labouring classes may have been the immediate provocation for the revolt, but its often articulate leaders were also able to identify misgovernment and exploitation as its deeper causes. ...

The Church was also deeply affected by the unstable nature of society and its beliefs in the late fourteenth century. The parish clergy, thinned out by the Black Death, seems to have suffered from a decline not only in numbers but also in quality. The moral and intellectual shortcomings of the clergy, though scarcely novel as causes for literary complaint, struck certain English observers with particular force. If the worldliness of monks, friars, and religious hangers-on was a butt of Chaucer’s satire, the more worrying inadequacy of the parish clergy proved a recurrent theme in Langland’s poetry. Relatively few educated English men and women expressed doubts concerning the basic truths of Christianity as they were defined by the Church, but many more were prepared to question the standing, authority, and behaviour of the Church’s ordained representatives. (Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. New Delhi: 1994, rpt. 2011. Pp 50-51)

Mark in this quotation the ritualistic nature of Christianity in the hands of clergy. There were “hangers-on” in large numbers in and around the churches. These did not care much for the miseries of the common people who were groaning under the weight of natural calamities. Instead of identifying with the suffering people, the clergymen and their associates went about their worldly pursuits cynically. If Chaucer satirized the monks and friars of the day, he did so to highlight the gap between their word and deed. His poetry moved closer to a direct comment on society than a description that would afford imaginative pleasure linked with watching nature in its various hues. It would be more appropriate thus to term Chaucer a social historian who brought to life the real conditions in England’s rural and urban scene. Reference is also made in the quote to the likely reason behind the fall of standards in clergymen’s behaviour. The famine of the thirteen forties that caused havoc to the social fabric in England, particularly in the countryside is the case in point. We are told in the quote given above that the famine “thinned” the number of the clergy and compelled them to adopt the cruel and insensitive worldly ways. It appears that the strategy for survival sickeningly combined with evil tricks that the underprivileged might have taken recourse to at the time. The evil intention to take advantage of the faith of the pious raised its head in terms of religious and moral preaching. We see account after account of this in the speeches and paraphrased views of the various characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. The famous Chaucerian irony emerging from his descriptions, uses time and again, a hint of the phrases and expressions, that men associated with the church used in their exchanges. Thus, what was a source of entertainment and pleasure in Chaucer’s time became a subject of social interest in the succeeding centuries. Each manner, gesture and phrase that Chaucer puts forth to sketch his characters tells an entirely new and realistic picture to the readers coming to him in the later periods, be it Elizabethan, Augustan, or Modern. The interest in the society of the time Chaucer took in the fourteenth century assumed humanist proportions and brought the poet nearer to us with each passing century.

1.7 CHARACTERISTICS OF CHAUCER’S ART AND VISION

If in the twentieth and twenty-first century, Chaucer relates so well with us, it is because Chaucer is vitally interpreted by us in our own context and imagined as a presence standing next to us. This makes him a modern poet with concerns that are at once reality-centred, appreciative and moving. John Dryden observed:

[Chaucer] must have been a man of most wonderful comprehensive nature, because, as it has been truly observed of him, he has taken into the compass of his *Canterbury Tales* the various manners and humours (as we now call them) of the whole English nation, in his age. Not a single character has escaped him. All his pilgrims are severally distinguished from each other; and not only in their inclinations, but in their very physiognomies and persons... (Sullivan, Sheila. Ed. *Critics on Chaucer*. New Delhi: Universal Book Stall, Rpt., 1994. 13-14)

Mark the words “severally distinguished” here. This denotes more than their individual specificities such as physical attributes, and takes into cognizance their peculiarities from others of their type. They might be from the same social group, and yet they hold dissimilarities that define them as individuals. In the quote, “inclinations,” too, is significant. It highlights their likes and dislikes as well as opinions. The word “persons” says it all, it points towards the kind of human being the character was unlike all others in the company.

Dryden, the great seventeenth century writer, is not oblivious of the tales that these characters will tell as they go along their journey to Canterbury. For Dryden, the teller and the tale will together typify the larger person with whom Chaucer as a poet engages. To quote:

The matter and manner of [the characters’] tales, and of their telling, are so suited to their different educations, humours, and callings, that each of them would be improper in any other mouth. Even the grave and serious characters are distinguished by their several sorts of their gravity: their discourses are such as belong to their age, their calling, and their breeding; such as are becoming of them, and of them only. Some of his persons are vicious, and some virtuous, some are unlearn’d, or (as Chaucer calls them) lewd, and some are learn’d. Even the ribaldry of the low characters is different: the Reeve, the Miller, and the Cook are several men, and distinguished from each other as much as the mincing Lady-Prioress and the broad-speaking, gap-toothed Wife of Bath. (Sullivan, Sheila. Ed. *Critics on Chaucer*. New Delhi: Universal Book Stall, Rpt., 1994. 14)

1.8 A VIEW OF *THE WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE*

Let us talk about *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*. It follows the pattern of a link between one tale and another within the overall structure of *The Canterbury Tales*. This means that it is to be the beginning of a new chapter in the account. We might bear in mind that the nature of the account here is dramatic, with characters to whom specific roles have been assigned by the writer. In that sense, the Wife of Bath is a character with a presence that catches our attention. Her physical appearance, her mental make-up, her social status, her way of conversing with others are clearly chalked out in the description. The episode is so vivid that once we imagine her movements and hear her speech, we have before us a living and indeed a vibrant human being who leaves an impact on us. The writer presents her as an open-minded and confident person, something difficult to comprehend in the medieval period. Initially we wonder whether women at that time enjoyed the kind of freedom the Wife of Bath exhibits through her behaviour.

The second point we might consider in the context is that of the prologue itself that as form would dictate its terms. It has a method of its own, its own inner dynamic might enable one to earn courage for establishing equation with other people. *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* offers a break from the tales and opens a window to the world that surrounds conditions in the tales. Its informality and at the same time the serious role it might play in the movement of the text’s account are beautifully interwoven. See how because of the informality, it gives an occasion to the travellers for feeling at ease with themselves and take attention away from the mission they are jointly pursuing. At the level of the form, the prologue frees the narrative from constraints of the teller (the poet Chaucer) and the host (the inn-keeper). Who has the reins, then? In answer, we might say, none. The shackles of art, the norms and principles of the aesthetic are taken away and suddenly we find ourselves standing in the market place where any sundry voice can catch our attention. We may remind ourselves that the prologue is supposed to be short and might thus lead us smoothly to the tale.

Indeed, in the case of the *Prologue* under discussion, the convention is flouted. We note that once the wife of bath starts speaking, she goes on and on with one reference woven with another seamlessly. Instead of a link between two tales that the last and the present traveller would tell, this prologue assumes independence as an episode, a happening with a beginning, a middle and an end. This takes the reader into the world of the travellers who belong to the fourteenth century. Chaucer follows the specific logic of

a historian face to face with a phenomenon and the life pattern of the people he is talking about. In one sweep, thus, we are standing next to a person who breathes, talks, disagrees and fights, so to say. Chaucer enables himself to note the mannerism of the travellers, their moods, opinions, gestures and thought patterns. We get to know that this is how people in the fourteenth century conducted themselves. In that sense, the present prologue is unique. It puts us in touch with a woman who led an unconventional life and that which did not cause raising of eyebrows. The reason for this was that England of the fourteenth century had a social group scattered in the small towns and villages and which lived by their wit and living skills. They observed manners, etiquettes, and norms and at the same time empowered enough to assert their point of view. They were not poor or starving, weighed down by miseries and hunger. For instance, if they could afford going on a pilgrimage riding horses, they were well to do by normal standards. By the description, we may guess, too, that this chunk of population was quite big. They enjoyed liberty enough to taunt, harangue and argue at length. For this reason, in the *Prologue* under discussion, *The Wife of Bath* looks at some travellers specifically and chooses to contradict them if they nurtured opinions opposite to hers.

Getting back to the structure of the *Prologue*, we note interestingly, the beginning and the end in it would remain of little consequence since they may not add much to the text, the middle is where the value lies. Along with Wife of Bath, we have a few companions who come forward and join her in the debate. They contest her point of view and give a different perspective to the one she is making. Likewise, the figures of the five husbands lurking in the background come alive as important participants in the world of matrimony the society where the institution operates.

1.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we had a view of the life in fourteenth century England for comprehending Chaucer's power and appeal as a poet. This led us to consider the variety of Chaucer's works in their variety and richness. This was followed by a focus on Chaucer's humanity, secularism and modernity. Finally, we considered the nature and function of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* that would be discussed further in the second unit.

1.10 QUESTIONS

1. Briefly discuss Chaucer's vision of life and society.
2. In what way is Chaucer a great humanist? Elaborate.
3. What are the main features of Chaucer's modernity? Explain.
4. Write a critical note on Chaucer's modernity.

1.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Handyside, I.G. Ed. *Chaucer. The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. London: Macmillan, 1987.
2. Harman, Chris. fp. 1999, *A People's History of the World*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, rpt. 2010.
3. Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. New Delhi: 1994, rpt. 2011.
4. Sullivan, Sheila. Ed. *Critics on Chaucer*. New Delhi: Universal Book Stall, Rpt., 1994.

UNIT 2 CHAUCER: *THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Woman Question: Ramifications
- 2.3 Dramatic Nature of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*
 - 2.3.1 The Wife in the Role of Teller of the Tale
 - 2.3.2 The Wife Characterized
 - 2.3.3 The Wife as an Interpreter
- 2.4 *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* From Point of View of Form
 - 2.4.1 The Character Imagined as Individual
 - 2.4.2 Idea of Type as Built into the *Prologue*
- 2.5 *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* as Example of Social Criticism
- 2.6 The Structure of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and Jankins, The Fifth Husband
 - 2.6.1 Neat Divisions in the Wife's Prologue
 - 2.6.2 The Structure
 - 2.6.3 Alison and Jankins
 - 2.6.4 Women, Realism and the World
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Questions
- 2.9 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In unit 2 of the present block, we gained a view of Chaucer's life and works that covered the fourteenth century English society and culture as well as the poems Chaucer wrote under various heads. In this unit, we study a part of Chaucer's text. It is called *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. This forms part of *The Canterbury Tales* at the point where the Wife of Bath has a chance to tell the fellow pilgrims her tale; her purpose is to entertain the audience and interact with them directly, too. This means that she could address the pilgrims, share with them details about her personal life and link these with the tale. We necessarily think about the *Prologue* here, an introductory piece that may add to the jovial atmosphere in which the tour to Canterbury is conducted. We shall also go into the nature of the *Prologue* as form, its role and function in the telling of the tale so that knowledge is earned about the Wife of Bath as a person and her attitude to the society she lived in. It is of interest for us that the Wife of Bath carries in her a story, and an autobiography. The latter is not less meaningful and valuable than the tale the Wife would present. Her views about men and women of the day and the relationship they have with one another might tickle our imagination and compel us to think about the ideological implications of her conduct.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will help us understand the meaning and message of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, that part of *The Canterbury Tales* where the woman in question is presented in realistic terms. In the words of Muriel Bowden, the woman is described as follows:

The Wife of Bath's orderly and well set-up appearance, as has been suggested, is in keeping with the strong directness of her character. She is one who has always known exactly what she wants and exactly how to get it. she desires, and has obtained importance in her community; good times with gay companions—"In felawshipewelkoude she laughe and carpe" (Bowden, Muriel. "The Good Wife of Juxta Bathon" in *Critics on Chaucer: Readings in Literary Criticism*. Ed Shiela Sullivan New Delhi: Universal Book Stall, rpt. 1994. I. 474).

This is a one line expression of her character and attitude. In the specific *Prologue* preceding her tale, this is clearly reflected. Her manner of speech, the way she addresses her companions and articulates her view of the surrounding world defines her person overall. Jovial and sociable by nature, the Wife creates an ambience of spontaneity and flow where guards are down and the entire crowd of pilgrims would respond to her tale with empathy. They might hold an opinion different from that of her, but they would quite openly consider her opinion for what it is. For the critic, Muriel Bowden, her characterization at the hands of Chaucer in the *General Prologue* also constitutes “a wide variety of love affairs; and, as we shall hear, the excitements and pleasures of travel. *The Wife of Bath* leads a systematized life for all its florid quality, and so her bold countenance, “reed of hewe”, escapes being blowzy and is attractive in its vigour.” (99).

As a literary device, *The Prologue* as such, whether *General Prologue* or *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, plays the important role of connecting with the audience. Indeed, the word stands for introducing the text. The word became quite popular in English writing after Chaucer employed it in *The Canterbury Tales*. In Chaucer's poem, the audience consists of the travellers going on a pilgrimage. Keep also in mind the word holy land to which the pilgrims are proceeding. How it is a pilgrimage, how the members of the travelling group pilgrims and how the destination holy land or a place where the travellers would pay homage is well laid out by the poet under a plan. Chaucer uses in an effective manner his famous irony at many places in the text. This is to entertain the reader as also to tell her/ him that one should remain alert about the way the world goes. This will connect us well with descriptions in *Wife of Bath's Prologue* that we shall take up at length in the following account.

2.2 THE WOMAN QUESTION: RAMIFICATIONS

In the case of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer had decided to keep the tale in the background and put in front the spectacle of English society—the way the society conducted itself and interpreted its institutions. In Chaucer's text, the question is of the woman negotiating her life's path and the institution of marriage. In England of the time, women would be at the receiving end of male oppression and be treated as slaves, without any rights. Her functionality was in focus, not her inner worth. Males used their economic might to keep her in check. It was a male-dominated world.

Aware of this state of affairs, Chaucer has picked up for depiction in this tale a woman of great strength, vitality and aggression. Further, she is outspoken. This went against the norms of the time. We might particularly identify the rural background from which this woman comes. Fashionable and conscious in her own way, she carries a special aura. It is difficult to fiddle with her. She mixes up with the male folk as their equal in all respects. First, she has come to join this group of her own accord from the village Bath where she has a house of her own. She rides a horse with as much skill as a male would. In social conversation, too, she leads most of the time. She is also good at repartee. When it comes to elaborating a point, she can spin a web of words where arguing and counter-arguing are her forte. Enabled by these, she establishes a rapport with the fellow travellers and helps the whole company see the power of her social standpoint. It goes to the credit of Chaucer that she is given a whole length of representation as not merely a teller of a tale but one who essayed a comprehensive approach to life.

2.3 DRAMATIC NATURE OF *THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE*

While discussing the dramatic nature of Chaucer's art, we may refer to a comment made by Nevill Coghill. It goes as follows:

Chaucer seems to describe [one specific character] with the same, smooth, objective but friendly appraisal that he had bestowed upon the other pilgrims: there is no show of disfavour. He even seems to admire them for being so perfect of their kind, as a naturalist might admire a cobra, the finest in his collection. No doubt he took immense pleasure in creating them and his ironical flatteries of them seem a kind of payment for this pleasure. (Bowden, Murrel. “The Good Wife of Juxta Bathon” in Sullivan 15)

What stands out in this quotation is “friendly appraisal” that indicates the author putting himself in the shoes of the character. Indeed, this might heighten the irony yet further since the reader would always be aware of the gap between what the author stood for and the overall frame of the composition. Note that being a friend and appraising someone are two different things, but the subtle balance maintained between the two tells its own story.

The format of the *Prologue* is of dramatic presentation. We have in front of us a character addressing an audience. We have before us a woman in flesh and blood who has seen ups and downs of life. This has made her forthright. There is an air of indifference about her. Interestingly, she would touch upon topics of general interest. The significant part of her role in the narrative of *The Canterbury Tales* is that she has a history of her own. This lends authenticity to whatever she would speak. The account she shares with the rest of the company is at the same time personal. Thus, the woman described as Wife of Bath is in the mode of an arguer and a committed person who will prove the strength of her case emphatically. Is it then an address, a confession, an assertion meant to win sympathy or support of the gathering?

The *Prologue* is not merely a link between the part preceding it and the one following it. The writer is not in a hurry to see her as a narrator, as a person carrying out a job assigned to her. The *Prologue* has an independence that enables it to become an episode that would fit in broadly with *The Canterbury Tales*. There are aesthetic characteristics in it that give it the look of a new genre. We may call it an essay on a topic.

2.3.1 The Wife in the Role of Teller of the Tale

The *Prologue* starts with a general comment from the Wife Alison. The beginning mentions the subject of marriage—that would be focus of her attention, and on it she would build an edifice of theory. Yet, the theory is not of abstract variety. Instead, it is based on what she calls experience. Quite precisely, she refers to her consciously-lived life that began at the age of twelve years when her first marriage happened. This, she says, was followed by four more marriages, one after another. Soon, she invokes religion to say that no precise number of marriages was recommended to a woman by the religious dictum. Was it four, or five? She brings in God to iterate that all that society believes in or sanctions with respect to the precise number of a woman’s marriages or husbands is its own doing, not God’s. In her opinion, how marriages happen or the number of times they happen follows the decision of humans. As she goes further in elaborating the idea, “King Solomon, the wise king” is mentioned to have more wives than the supposedly prescribed number of wives. Her statement made tongue-in-cheek is—“Lo, here, the wise king, daun Salomon;/ I trowe he hadde wives mo than oon” (And hear this, how about Lord Solomon, the wise king; I believe that he had more wives than just one!”).

2.3.2 The Wife Characterized

The Wife talks about high qualities and “frailties” in humans. The context is of marriage, virginity, purity and self-control. These may be looked at from two angles. One is of being a strict adherent of morality in life’s affairs, whereas the second is of being lax, having weaknesses of the flesh, for instance. She is supportive of the latter. In her opinion, as she says,

*I graunte it wel, I have noon envie,
Thogh maidenhead preferebigamie.
It liketh hem to be clene, body and goost;
Of mynestaat I nil nat make no boost,
For ye knowe, a lord in his houshold,
He nathnat every vessel al of gold;
Somme been of tree, and doonhir lord servise.
God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wise,*

*And everich hath of God a propreyifte,
Som this, som that, as him likethshifte. (95-104)*

Mark these lines to decipher the message they contain. The Wife is no preacher, nor a pure person in her conduct. In fact, she is not a Christian observing rules of piety even as she believes in God, Christ and the Apostles. Her words are right and the practice is clearly faulty. But Chaucer has put in her mouth the central truth of human life. This passage presents the core of Chaucer's wisdom and understanding. It expresses that doctrine of humanism Chaucer is famous for. After admitting that she does not meet the high standards of righteousness, she asserts in her own inimitable manner the variety and diversity of men's and women's actions. The metaphor used to convey this is of a lord's household that has not all pots and pans of gold but those made of other metals coexisting with the golden ones. To her mind, different kinds of vessels serve a useful purpose and prove their utility to the household. The metaphor is cleverly combined with the humanity on planet Earth where every individual human being possesses this or that "*propreyifte*" (proper gift or quality) given to him/her by God following His "pleasure." In God's eyes, there is no strict hierarchy of importance among his creations. See Chaucer's linguistic precision: "*And everich hath of God a propreyifte,/ Som this, som that, as him likethshifte*" (103-4).

2.3.3 The Wife as an Interpreter

The Wife has her own way of interpreting God's message, full of wit and courage. The twists and turns in her comment impress us as, for instance, her announcement that she as a human being is not duty-bound to follow God's words. Instead, she would observe the high principles in their breach, not observance. Further, she would use her energies for the fulfilment of pleasures (of flesh) afforded by marriage. To quote: "*I wol bestowe the flour of al myn age/ In the actes and in fruit of mariage*" (113-4). Here, "*flour*" signifies flower and "*actes*" acts. We might particularly comprehend the construction "*fruit of mariage*" that points towards joys of intimacy between man and woman. Chaucer's choice of words is exemplary, a method and vision that links him with life's realities in the surrounding world. She is aware that social codes and norms are human-made and serve the ends of living at levels of body and mind. This works at variance with supposed virtues of piety and chastity. The Wife of Bath is the woman of the world.

Does the Wife not think too high of herself? She is energetic and confident. Her way of reading the norms of the time is based on her interests, not of the society to which she belongs to. The Pardoner among the audience does not feel comfortable when she has spoken words denoting independence of her will. He would rather that he delayed his own marriage till another year. His announcement both amuses and alerts the audience. It goes as follows:

*I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas,
What shold I bye it on my flesh so deere?
Yet hadde I leverewedde no wyf to-yeere!*

Her comment has a tone of teasing and a clear disagreement. We see that the Wife is not cowed down by Pardoner's mild censure. She argues her case and at the end says that she did not intend to hurt anyone but only to put forth her view.

The Wife's account of her marriages is interesting. To her, the first three marriages got her money and lands, and the husbands possessed wealth for which she married them. The hint is that she did not mind the age-gap since her eye was on their resources. Also, she treated them "cruelly" since she had the upper hand, being younger than them. She handled the three husbands cleverly, keeping them on toes. She would accuse them for ogling the younger women in the neighbourhood and go her own way when it suited her. Such a revelation of her talking skills lets the audience know that as a woman she was doubly as successful in terrifying men as they would be in bullying women. Consider the following dialogue rendered in modern English:

“You say that oxen, asses, horses and hounds are tested many times, and the same is the case with basins and pots that men buy. This applies as well to spoons and stools, etc.—the items in use at home. Think the same way about utensils, clothes and tapestry. Why not are the women tested the same way till they enter wedlock? You old fool! Then only, you say, we come out in our true colours.

“Further, you remark that I am angry since you did not admire my looks, did not call me “charming lady” and all that, such as you were made to spend so much money on my birthday, got me good dresses, respected my maids and put up bravely with my father’s relatives and acquaintances. Thou haggard, outdated barrelful of lies!”

With help from this rendering, have a look at Chaucer’s original lines, using sounds in the English of his time, so evocative and tongue-in-cheek:

*“Thou seist that oxen, asses, hors, and houndes,
They been assayed at diverse stoundes;
Bacins, laours, er that men hem bye,
Spoones and stooles, and al swichhousboundre,
And so been pottes, clothes, and array;
But folk of wives maken noon assay,
Til they be wedded; olde dotard shrewe!*

*“Thou seist also that it displeseth me
But if that thou woltpreyse my beautee,
And but thou pourealwey upon my face,
And clepe me “faire dame” in every place.
And but thou make a feeste on thilke day
That I was born, and make me fressh and gay;
And but thou do to my norice honour,
And to my chambererewithinne my bour,
And to my fadres folk and his allies—
Thus seistow, old barel-ful of lies! (285-302)*

2.4 THE WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE FROM POINT OF VIEW OF FORM

Let us consider this part of the *Prologue* from the point of view of form. As representation of the character of Wife of Bath, it presents the trend of how a person is imagined and projected in literature. This was something new in the literature of the time, with no tradition of story-telling or dramatizing in the established sense. The important thing is the dynamic idea of a human being, the way one handles the self and the way s/he is interpreted by the reader. The trend assumed a distinct shape with time and reached its zenith in Shakespeare’s drama more than two hundred years later.

2.4.1 The Character Imagined as Individual

In Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, the Wife is imagined as an individual who understands her world concretely. Her analysis is steeped in a deeply understood reality of the time. With respect to the conduct of husbands, she has a great deal of wisdom to convey. Are husbands masters of the household, or who run its affairs together with their wives? The questions raised in the text relate to social rights. For the Wife, women in matrimony are held on a tight leash. She points out that women are compared with items of use in the home. The custom is that they are supposed to be tested the same way as vegetables, or pots and pans. If money was spent on the wife’s upkeep, it is for making the man respectable. The complaint of the Wife is serious even as she makes it dramatic. There is a double irony in this—the point made by the woman is serious and the passion with which she argues makes it laughable. She quite clearly plays to the gallery. Finally, who is scoring the critical point that women should be treated as an

entertaining nuisance? The reference to the young Jankin who has “crispe” hair “shining as gold so fyn” introduces the element of jealousy the husband may harbour that he wins the Wife’s attention more.

2.4.2 Idea of Type as Built into the *Prologue*

We note that in the *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, Alison fights against the gender difference strongly. She has been targeted as a woman all her life. She invited criticism for not being a true wife. In relation to the husband, she always found herself helpless. Whether it was money, land or privilege, she had to work extra and use tricks and stratagem for ensuring gain. None appreciated her quality of mind or ability to mobilize opinion. There is no reference in the text to her personal skills. If she expresses an opinion, people interpret it as an affront. Consider that in the company of pilgrims, people hear her talk only for amusement, not listen to her for any gain or benefit. This invisible prejudice rattles her, makes her feel uneasy and insecure. This results in her being worked up in the middle of her introductory remarks. One reason why her Prologue is so long, unlike those of other characters is that no one takes her seriously. This is not merely the case in the Prologue but would have been in life as well. This absence of individuality is a part of Chaucer’s realism. It is suggested that women particularly got their identity from marriage or family, seldom from strength of qualities and skills.

2.5 THE WIFE OF BATH’S PROLOGUE AS EXAMPLE OF SOCIAL CRITICISM

At this point in the account of Wife of Bath, we may also recognize the interpretive skills of this dynamic personality. Particularly significant in her treatment of the popular opinion is her reference to Ptolemy whom she quotes for elucidating moral assertion. The Greek astronomer is evoked to say that a man should be good at one’s own work than keeping an eye on what others are doing. This amounts to focusing upon one’s affairs with ability. Dame Alice gives it a comic twist to argue that the husband should devote his time to his wife, give her happiness and not cross boundary to curtail her freedom. There is a direct link here between her freedom to move around in the neighbourhood for seeking pleasure and men’s right to mix with other women. The humour in the tale gets a boost since the husband or husbands she talks about are of old age and they are not always capable of fulfilling demands of pleasure of the women they married. The hint is that husbands of this variety are suspicious because of their advanced age. At the same time, they keep up the show of vitality by mixing up with as many women of the neighbourhood as possible. For her, husbands carry on their exploits by dint of money and social influence that they enjoy. What should the poor woman do in such a case? Alison raises this question rhetorically and answers it by putting forward the thesis that women have the inherent ability to beat men at their own game. They can do this, says she, by hiding behind their beauty, shiny clothes and tricks not likely to be fathomed by men-folk. One of the effective tricks available to women is launching the counter-attack on men. She repeats the charges men level against women and, thus, becomes the aggrieved party. The dialogue used by men to suppress women is worth quoting. In her attempt, she turns tables on them by addressing them directly. It goes as follows:

*Thou liknest eek wommens love to helle,
To bareynelond, ther water may natdwelle.
Thou liknest it also to wildefyr;
The moore it brenneth, the moore it hath desir
To consume every thing that brentwole be.
Thou seyest, right as wormesshende a tree,
Right so a wyfdestroyeth hire housbonde;
This knowe they that been to wives bonde. (371-378)*

In modern English, these lines speak of associating women with barren land where no water exists, or conversely with wild fire that the more it spreads in the forest, the more destruction it causes. The question is whether such a comparison is fair. We forget that in the quoted lines, the description has escaped the lips of an actual woman defending her choice of indulgence as a married woman. Instead, we

wake up to the intolerance to which women are subjected in life. See how women appear to the men-folk. From fire, the comparison is extended to the worms eating into a tree. The humour running across the quoted lines alerts us about the Wife threatening her husband.

Alison's relationship with her husbands is transactional—she gives her favours to them only if they met her demands regarding money. She knows how to handle husbands. Her first three husbands served only for making available to her resources and comforts. As husbands, they would have given her tough time, but she was clever-witted and gave them back for their trickery. Her supposed womanly ways stood her in good stead. They were old and she was young. Help came her way through this route. She frankly shares this with the fellow travellers on way to Canterbury. The depiction here reflects upon life in the fourteenth century. Even as types, women identified areas of restriction and control. That these existed makes us conscious about the division between men and women; these worked to the detriment of women. A social phenomenon of this sort would be deeply discouraging for not just women but all those who were placed lower in the hierarchical order. Indirectly, Chaucer places such categories of living under the scanner.

2.6 THE STRUCTURE OF *THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE* AND JANKINS, THE FIFTH HUSBAND

2.6.1 Neat Divisions in the Wife's Prologue

The Wife of Bath's Prologue changes thematically in the middle of the account and it portrays Alison from then on as not a domineering person, but one who would be at the receiving end of males. This happens after the death of the third husband. The fourth husband whom she marries is of a different temperament. He keeps relations with other women and cheats on her. She feels agonised. How could she bear such an ignominy? This gives her an occasion to relook her strategy to keep the husbands in check and lord over them. The change in her situation is dramatic. How to cope with such a problem and keep the husband in shackles? At this point, her representation becomes greatly comic since she is compelled to invent ways for harnessing the fourth husband. An extrovert, Alison begins playing a part at this stage. She tells her audience that it became necessary to torture him mentally. For meeting the requirements of the case, she planned to have lovers of her own and praised them for their manliness, appearance and manners. Jealousy was made the weapon to hit the husband with. In full knowledge of the husband, she would visit the lovers. On other occasions, she waited for her husband to leave home. As soon as he left, she would go out to meet one or the other lover. This act of hers instilled a sense of uncertainty and insecurity in the mind of the fourth husband who was reduced to a mental wreck. Such a strain on the fourth husband told on his health and soon he died. Yet, she had run into another lover meanwhile whom she married soon after. His name was Jankins.

2.6.2 The Structure

So far, we have had a view of the Wife's four husbands and the way they were tackled in the relationship. The management of the first four marriages required a perspective and the Wife did ample justice to the issue. This took place at the level of the Prologue's structure, too. What is this structure?

Since the length of *Wife of Bath's Prologue* is equal to that of *The Canterbury Tales* itself, it is only natural that the question be looked at with attention. Broadly speaking, the Wife's Prologue has three clear markings—the beginning where marriage is interpreted as an institution in terms of theory. In it are brought religion, moral system, philosophy, society and the human species per se. Here, the wife is a kind of philosopher and an analyst.

This is followed by the Wife's account of the first four marriages that were a means for her to extract as much money and land from the spouses as possible. All the husbands who came in her life one after another, the accepted principle being monogamy, were older than her in age and they worked at her behest. The version offered by the Wife tells of the cruel treatment she gave them. This is not to suggest

that the husbands were good people and they did not try to take advantage of her, or exploit her. Their ways were wily, too. It is significant that Chaucer chose not to give them any name—they were first, second, third, or fourth husband. Why? The answer is that they fell under the category of agents of dominance. Thus, they paved the way to socially critiquing matrimony as an instrument of oppression. Such an institution would not allow freedom to a wife. It would compel her, on strength of norms as well as explicit rules to remain obedient and servile. In this specific case, as a part of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, the description was a pointer to the existing gender division. The Prologue as it stood, earned weight since the woman narrator based it on her autobiographical details.

The representation of the fifth husband is an entirely different case. With it, the Wife's Prologue comes to an end. It is a sort of conclusion. However, as we see, the 'conclusion' is open-ended, problematic and comic. The husband Jankin is an individual with a name. He is twenty years old whereas Alison is middle-aged. For the first time in her life, she is struck by the emotion of love. She likes the man's company and relates well with him. He is physically stronger than her and can turn violent if he did not like her actions. At one point, he strikes her so hard that she partially loses the sense of hearing. Even as he has his own indulgences. With great difficulty, she bears it all but offers resistance many a time. The constant quarrelling is also because of his quoting a book of norms all the time. That is finally the bone of contention. A serious issue with him is of money that the Wife passes on to him and becomes totally devoid of resources. This renders her helpless. Can she come out of this situation and regain her lost value? Also, if she tried her might in this direction, would she succeed in the aim? These are what she, and the author who created her confront. That makes it an apt ending of an important and notable episode.

2.6.3 Alison and Jankins

In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, these two characters have an individuality that is missing in many others in this part of the text. For instance, they know who they are and what they want. Alison knows that there is a series of experiences behind her. She remembers difficulties, pitfalls and confusions that came her way in her struggle with the four husbands she had at different points of time. She is aware that she no longer has the charm she had as a young woman. In her journey to adulthood, she has mainly faced hurdles; it is a different matter that she came out a winner finally in those struggles. At this moment in the text, Alison and Jankin have the faculty of devising ways to reach their respective goals. Both have a clear sense of assertion. Emotionally, too, they are strongly drawn to each other. Does it mean they are in love? So far as Alison is concerned, this appears to be the case.

Alison is a born lover. Her definition of this emotion is as much at the level of mind as body, and she does not allow shyness or femininity or even fidelity to come near her. A woman of the world with interests in the mundane, she would prefer to be reckless in matters of the senses. Her words in this regard ring true. To quote:

Allas, allas, that evere love was sinne!
I folwed ay myninclinacioun
...
I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,
But everefolwedemyn appetite.

(Alas, alas, if ever love could be sinful!
I always obeyed my desire
...
In love I was never guided by mind,
But sought guidance from the urge.)

But when she chose Jankin for husband, she found that she was constantly harassed by him. He did not like her for her wild ways and made it clear to her that she was wicked. He would extend the torture by

reading out those passages from his book, which he always kept by his side, that described only women of evil intentions. This made her hate him even more, as she argued unto her. But one day, she put a stop to his behaviour. Pulling out three pages from his book, she threw them into the fire and Jankin in return hit her violently. She lay almost dead in front of him, seeing which he was alarmed. Gaining consciousness, she had a sharp exchange with him. Reconciliation ensued and Jankin returned to her all the money, lands and other resources, including control over the house. There indeed was some trick behind it and it worked successfully. From then on, the Wife and Jankin lived peacefully and happily till the latter's death. This was happy ending to a Prologue that began with sharp argument, loose talk, advocacy of freedom and irreligiosity in human behaviour and assertion of one who lived by instinct that by morality.

2.6.4 Women, Realism and the World

As we look back to the fourteenth century generally and the life captured in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* specifically, we realise that much depends on the approach of the poet engaging with that period. It is to the credit of the poet Chaucer that in one go, he covered the wide territory of prejudice against women in the fourteenth century England as well as the intellectual repertoire of a woman. The mode used to project the cause was comic, something unthinkable then. The crux was tolerance and patient appreciation of potentialities hidden in human initiative. Chaucer could see that women could survive in difficult conditions, and use them indeed to their advantage. Women were tenacious as well as flexible. They could put social restrictions on the back burner and think of the means to participate in surroundings of hierarchy. Yet, all stood face to face with another agency of vivacity and spontaneity—that being nature from which a lot could be learnt. Poets understood it better than reformers, teachers and men of order. Think of what Virginia Woolf had to say about Chaucer. For her,

Nature, uncompromising, untamed, was no looking glass for happy faces, or confessor of unhappy souls. She was herself; sometimes, therefore, disagreeable enough and plain, but always in Chaucer's pages with the hardness and the freshness of an actual presence. Soon, however, we notice something of greater importance than the gay and picturesque appearance of the medieval world—the solidity which plumps it out, the conviction which animates the characters. Virginia Woolf: "What is This World" in Sullivan, 18)

See to what extent this comment could be applied to the portrayal of the Wife of Bath in the specific context of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

The Wife of Bath's Prologue offers a debate that takes place among the pilgrims on a holy journey to Canterbury. Apparently, the *Prologue* is a speech made by the Wife of Bath. However, she holds conversation through her speech with the fellow travellers and herself. In the exercise, she comes out as a robust person, a woman of the world who enjoys life since she lives it on her terms. During the speech, she makes pertinent points about marriage, being a married woman in a male dominated world, the struggle on the part of an individual to cope with pressures of society, matters of money and property, as well as prejudices that accompany any discourse linked with initiative, privilege, and power. We may also not overlook the link of the *Prologue* with the tale that the Wife of Bath will finally relate to her audience. The crux of the *Prologue* is the assertive and dynamic nature of the woman Alison in fourteenth century England.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. In what sense is *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* dramatic? Explain.
2. The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* contains social criticism, particularly with respect to marriage, in a substantial manner. Discuss.

3. The Wife of Bath is a woman of great strength, vitality and aggression. She is a threatening presence in the *Prologue*. Do you agree? Give reasons.

2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Bowden, Muriel. "The Good Wife of Juxta Bathon" in *Critics on Chaucer: Readings in Literary Criticism*. Ed Shiela Sullivan New Delhi: Universal Book Stall, rpt. 1994.
2. Coghill, Nevill and Christopher Tolkien. Ed., Int. *Geoffrey Chaucer. The Pardoner's Tale*. New Delhi: OUP, rpt. 1991.
3. Handyside, I.G. Ed., *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. London: Macmillan, 1990. All lines quoted from the text in this unit refer to this edition.



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UNIT 3 SPENSER: LIFE AND WORKS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 European Thought
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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is meant to acquaint you with the larger trends of sixteenth century England that influenced the writing of the time. The religious cultural movements that shaped sixteenth century England have also been discussed in this unit. Specifically, in this unit the revolutionary movement of Renaissance that took place in the arts is looked at closely, tracing its development geographically and temporally. A view of various kinds of poetry written at the time that paved way for Spenser's writings is also considered in this unit. Finally, Spenser's biography is presented along with a bird's eye view of the works that he wrote during the different phases of his life.

3.1 INTRODUCTION



Edmund Spenser
(source: en.wikipedia.org)

Edmund Spenser belonged to the latter half of the sixteenth century. This was the period of Elizabeth I's reign. At the time, England was emerging as a strong nation. This process had begun with the uniting and integrating role of Henry VIII at the turn of the sixteenth century. The entire century was marked by the upward movement of England that would clearly define the nature of English nationhood. With Henry VII and VIII's rule in the background that laid the foundation of a stable and progressive England and one rich in resources, the initial years of the Elizabeth's rule raised hopes of prosperity. However, soon as the years moved in the direction of a steadied economic path, England faced a crisis within its nationalist structure. This had to do with the ideological and cultural issues that hung upon the Queen's supposed unacceptability. There was a lobby of Queen's detractors in England actively engaged in creating troubles

for her. The crisis occurred because of Henry VIII's policies that divided the English society along religious lines. Spenser's role in this period of crisis was, then, of presenting the idea of England as an integrated nation under the stewardship of Elizabeth—a difficult task to accomplish. On Spenser's side, the task was supposed to be fulfilled through visualization of the Queen as a solidifying factor. The queen would appear as a figure that inspired England as a well-knit political entity moving inexorably towards a unified structure.

The Faerie Queene, the great epic that Spenser wrote typifies the Queen's image as a subject of great regard and idealization. To Spenser, the Queen met the requirement of the times, strengthening ideas and opinions that would stand in good stead when difficulties raised head. In the great poem, Elizabeth is an example of mythification. In fact, she is not just a figure that has superhuman traits, but a whole perspective of glory and celebration. She is projected as beauty par excellence and a woman of many talents. England as a country is meant to worship her. See the ramifications of the idea of a 'faery' gifted with the appeal to enchant the country. There is a kind of magical aspect to her personality. Rightly, the imagined figure turns the poet into a creator of immense proportions. Spenser would thus be transformed into a genius who paves the path of unending success and long-standing inspiration. Perhaps for this reason Spenser is referred to as the great nationalist poet of England, first of its kind.

From here, we turn to the broader view of Europe—England aspired to place itself at the centre of the continent to carry out tasks of creating a world different from the existing one. A look at the emerging intellectual thought would help us understand the nature of new challenges that the country's genius would work out.

3.2 EUROPEAN THOUGHT

3.2.1 Transition from Middle Ages

It is interesting to note the transition of Europe from the 'dark ages' of medieval period into the thought-provoking era of Renaissance and Reformation. All the texts (Greek and Latin including) that could not be absorbed in the larger framework of Christianity were discarded by scholars in the medieval period. The major concern of scholars and writers during the middle ages had been to elaborate aspects of morality that also included miracles associated with the life of Christ. The middle ages centred on theology. Christianity, the main source of knowledge during the medieval period, believed man to be 'fallen' and thus helpless without the guidance of the divine. The Greek and Latin philosophies based on paganism* (see glossary) on the other hand emphasized self-sufficiency and potentiality in man. Plato (the Greek philosopher) believed that man with effort could attain union with God. This idea would not find favour with the middle ages where God was seen to be the saviour and human being as eternally dependent on him. Thus, many Greek and Latin texts that advocated an objective as well as exploratory approach were neglected and finally lost during the medieval era. Maurice Evans has observed: "To the medieval church the fall of Adam had left the human race so weak that best safety lay in flight, and the monastic life of celibacy, self-denial and prayer was the theoretic ideal". He further notes that for the medieval man "ascetic poverty rated more highly than civic usefulness, virginity than marriage, the contemplative than the active life". This was not so in the period following the medieval ages characterized by the Renaissance that took shape from fourteenth century onwards and flourished enormously in the sixteenth century.

3.2.2 Renaissance

It was in Italy that a conscious movement of Humanism began in the thirteenth century. Italy was comparatively more open to ideas and cultures and less conservative as also feudal than the rest of Europe. This was because Italy shared trade relations with the east and was exposed to its culture. Interaction with the east increased its scope of modernization. From 1300 onwards, Italian scholars began to search for manuscripts that had been kept in monastic libraries for a thousand years. Petrarch had gained renown by

1350 as the forerunner of Humanism, painstakingly collecting and editing manuscripts and making them available in Italy on a vast scale. More was added to the trend when Greek writing emerged at this time. The introduction of the printing press in the fifteenth century in Italy contributed to the making of a flood of books. The new humanist ideas borrowed from Latin and Greek texts translated in Latin soon spread across Europe. In England, it gained a footing in the sixteenth century specifically as Humanism entered English education and thought.

Renaissance—the rebirth of learning that took place in the sixteenth century in England—gave a new life to literature and the arts. The term Renaissance is used to refer to the revolutionary movement that began in Italy in the medieval period as mentioned above and gradually enveloped the whole of Europe. The movement set store by rational thought and cultivation of self. The discovery of the lost texts of classical Latin and Greek literature also created a new understanding among people in England specifically and Europe generally. It modified European thought.

Renaissance brought in a new value system in which education received immense importance. The humanists had deep faith in the idea that education and learning could help achieve one's best self. Renaissance educators thus discarded the old model of education where knowledge came as received. On the other hand, Renaissance redefined the framework of comprehending the existing phenomena. Consequently, it believed in the power of books. A view of education leading to a higher life is professed by Philip Sidney who was a contemporary of Spenser in his *Apologie for Poetrie*. He claims, "This purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgement and enlarging of conceyt, which commonly we call learning [was meant] to lead and draw us to as high a perfection" as our souls allow. (The medieval English style of writing found in Sidney and Spenser is different from modern English. The English language had different spelling at the time and was not standardized the way it became later. Thus you will find in Spenser's works words that are spelt differently but when read aloud they make sense.)

The major difference between the medieval period and the changing modern world was that the human being in the latter was a secular person and actively participated in one's life to continuously modify it on the strength of his labour and decision-making. In the context, Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* served an important purpose. The book was published in 1528 in Italian and was translated into English in 1561. Renaissance was at its peak during this period in England. The book gave a manual to men at the time to attain the 'ideal self' which would be equipped in arts and music as well as in affairs of politics and warfare. Castiglione believed that the main function of the men of the court was to assist the king in matters of governance. One was required to learn the skill of oratory and be a soldier at the same time. Further, in one's spare time one was expected to learn the art of being a poet, painter and a musician. This was in addition to the skills he acquired to converse gallantly with women, be chivalrous and dress up well. Such an assigned job brought to the fore a unique picture of man hitherto unheard of. There is no wonder that it appealed to the modern man of Renaissance who was willing to develop one's self.

3.2.3 Reformation

This movement for a new parameter of faith and link with God caused upheaval in Europe in the early sixteenth century. It hit at the very foundation of institutionalized religion, namely the Roman Catholic Church. Led by Martin Luther, the advocates of reformation believed in an individual's inner experience of God and the associated spiritual struggle and salvation. These were the ideas of early Protestantism. In it, faith was based on the word of the Bible and could be interpreted by the individual in one's own way. The church or the priest as a mediator between God and human being was no more important for the Protestants. A direct transaction with God was possible through the Bible and by following the principles laid down in the text.

In England, during the reign of Henry VIII the nature of the Church changed. Henry VIII in several acts passed in 1530s broke ties with the Roman Catholic Church and declared the Church of England or the

Anglican Church as supreme religious authority with the king as its head. Here, Protestantism found ready ground to flourish. With Reformation, new ideas of individual worth vis-à-vis God were put forward enabling writers to think of the individual as relatively autonomous and capable of correcting one's behavior based on the written word. Infusion of new energy into the writing of the period that was exploratory, skeptical, faith-centered and idealistic was the result. Thomas More's book *Utopia* written in 1516 is the case in point.

3.3 INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND OF SPENSER

Sixteenth century English poetry carries influences of both native traditions and values of human-centered existence that came to the fore in the wake of Renaissance. These form the specific intellectual background of Spenser as the poet carried the influences of early poets and thinkers before him. However, a paradigm shift takes place with the writing of Spenser in English literature as the idea of nationalism is evoked in his works. As a result of this, poetry ceases to be an entertaining art form and acquires socio-political dimensions meant to direct and guide the nation and its people on the path of social conduct.

3.3.1 Poetic Practice at the Time

The poetic practice at the time began with imitating the classics. The new technique in literature was thus 'Imitation'. Writers picked up classical texts that best suited their sensibility and reproduced them in their own way. The perspective of the specific context outside the purview of the translator—to faithfully reproduce a text became paramount. Writers freely borrowed subject and style from the classics and brought the spirit of their own age into it. Leonard Dean in his book *Renaissance Poetry* has offered a useful perspective on the subject:

Renaissance poetry is more formal, less autobiographical and less directly related to experience than much poetry of later periods. We infer from essays on poetry like Sidney's and from the actual poems that Renaissance poets were careful to distinguish themselves from historians and biographers, and to seek instead the formal excellence appropriate to the various kinds of poetry. A love poem was not an essay in autobiography, and even poems for special occasions like some of those by Jonson, Donne, and Marvell were not composed as historical documents. The prime aim, to use the Renaissance term, was to make an imitation. This act had two aspects: first the poet sought to grasp the essential meaning and value of experience and secondly, he tried to express that insight in a recognized and appropriate literary form. (Dean, Leonard ed. *Renaissance Poetry*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1961 i)

For instance, when Spenser was planning to write *The Faerie Queen* his most notable work, he told Sir Raleigh in a letter that he had chosen to write in his epic poem the history of King Arthur who had been "made famous," says Spenser, "by many mens former works and is also furthest from the daunger of envy and suspection of present time". He clearly states in the letter:

I have followed the antique Poets historicall, first Hmere, who in the Persons of Agamemnon and Ulysses hath ensampled a good governour and a virtuous man, the one in his Ilias, and the other in his Odysseis: then Virgil, whose like intention was to doe in the person of Aeneas: after him Ariosto comprised them both in his Orlando: and lately Tasso dissevered them againe, and formed both parts in two persons, namely that part which they in Philosophy call Ethice, or vertues of a private man, coloured in his Rinaldo. (Spenser. "Letter to Raleigh". *Edmund Spenser's Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Hugh Maclean, and Anne Lake Prescott. New York: Norton, 1993. 1)

As is clear from the above passage, Spenser was well-versed with the classical poets and, in fact, wished to follow or imitate their model of writing. Taking these "excellente Poets," he says that as an example he has ventured to present a portrait of King Arthur as a "brave knight perfected in the twelve private morall

vertues, as Aristotle hath devised” (1-2). Spenser is constantly guided in subject and form by these classical poets. This is also true of another important characteristic that the Renaissance poets borrowed from the classics namely, use of rhetoric in literature.

The poet during the Renaissance believed that poetry was a skilled and studied practice. It was not meant to be a spontaneous surge of a poet’s emotion. The latter view of poetry has dominated literary studies after the Romantic poets came to the fore in the 19th century and made the idea popular. During the Renaissance period, however, it was believed that poetry showed a mirror of life but a stylized mirror that was refined and decorated with poetic conventions. Thus, amplification of language and a sustained regular metre became standards of good poetry befitting Renaissance sensibility.

Still, writers learnt as much from the classics as they did from literature that was being written in Europe at the time. English writers were greatly influenced by Italian writers and followed the styles that were being adopted there. Three styles of poetry emerged in England specially and in Europe at large. The first was the high oratory of the heroic poem that was meant to be formal in style and abundant in rhetoric. It was also supposed to treat the subject with grandeur and seriousness with the use of a lofty language. The practice adhered to the proper principal of the epic poem. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* falls in this category of the heroic poem. The second type of poetry was more lighthearted and playful that did not have a serious subject. Love poetry fitted well with this style of writing. Accordingly, the poet followed decorum of this genre and wrote in regular metre as also rhyme. He consciously chose words and images meeting standards of the subject of love. But the style was witty and often used contradictions to explore the love emotion. Spenser's *Amoretti* is an example of this style of poetry. The third category of poetry was low poetry which had its origins in the pastoral world of rustics. Here, the lives of shepherds and ordinary country folk were presented. Accordingly, the metre used by poets would be of deliberate irregularity. Assuming that rural folks spoke in an unrefined manner, their poetry should also carry that rugged and raw quality going normal with the life in the countryside and the world of nature. Pastoral poetry belongs to this category of writing.

3.3.2 Tudor Poetry

Poetry during the medieval period had turned to the church for guidance and support. Thus, poetic conventions and the witticism of Chaucer were soon forgotten and discarded. When poets in the Tudor period acquired their own voice (with the fostering of the Tudor monarchs Henry VIII) they had a task to fulfil—renewing that interest in the older English tradition typified by Chaucer. Tudor poetry turned from the Church to the court. Tudor poets came after a period of political instability in England following the many civil wars. The peace process was on and it fell on the poets to build new conventions for versification. For this, they took inspiration from writers and works that had been lost in the medieval age. Early Tudor poets such as John Skelton brought in a new sophistication in poetry that later was taken over by Wyatt, Surrey and Sidney. We can trace Spenser’s poetic lineage from these writers.

By the year, 1512, Skelton had been established as the Orator Royal at the king’s court. He wrote poetry celebrating the victories of the king. This was important for the consolidation of the power of the young king. Skelton wrote satires, too, especially against the king’s counselor Wolsey. In this, poetry played a dual role—one, it reinforced the powers of the king and two, it attacked forces considered evil by the writer as a spokesman of the age. Skelton in the sixteenth century was known as a satirist. He put the Chaucerian irony to good effect. However, he often included colloquial forms in his poetry. Skelton belonged to the old English group of the gentry that believed in the rights and claims of the nobility and looked skeptically at the new phenomenon that was growing in England—the Tudor court showed preference for counselors with professional skills even when they were of relatively lower birth. Skelton engaged with writing satires about greed for position in the court and its corrupt practices. This performed a function necessary for the age. Maurice Evans has rightly observed the following about Skelton:

He is perhaps the most considerable poet between Chaucer and Spenser and comes at the point of intersection between the medieval and the humanist traditions. The great range of modes comprised within the *Canterbury Tales* is to be found equally in the works of Skelton, but split up into separate and tentatively humanist kinds, so that Skelton points both forward and back. His materials are Chaucerian, but his underlying assumptions are much closer to those of Spenser. (Evans, Maurice. *English Poetry in the Sixteenth Century*, London: Hutchinson University Library, 1955. 59)

Following the times of Skelton, there came a difficult period in England's history where writers were not free to speak their minds and were surrounded by conspiracies and intrigues at the court. This was the 1530s, the later years of Henry VIII. Writers such as Wyatt and Surrey could not write satires as Skelton did in his own time. Even Skelton was arrested in his later years. Under pressures of this kind, the young writers turned into 'Courtly poets' and filled their verses with non-political themes. The poetry of Wyatt and Surrey is, therefore, largely private and concerns itself with technique and refinement. Between the two poets, Wyatt's poetry is more notable for its theme and form. Wyatt introduced the Petrarchan sonnet in English literature (a discussion on the sonnet form specially would be provided in Unit 4). He brought to the fore love poetry but one that carried characteristics of secrecy and adulterous themes. These spoke of the times and the life at the court. He also wrote on traditional themes in short-line metres that were extensively used in the old ballads and the poetry of the fifteenth century. Wyatt was known as a poet of love lyric and one who deployed the Petrarchan sonnet form to create a dramatic sequence in poetry. He was the first poet to write sonnets in England. For instance, his sonnets, "My galy charged with forgetfulness" and "They Flee from Me" are imitations of Petrarch's sonnets and project idealistic love tinged with self-directed satire.

The next phase of Tudor poetry includes the names of Philip Sidney followed by Spenser. They were inheritors of the specific poetic mode current at the time. This historical phase gave poetry the chance to again turn to public life. The Elizabethan poet as defined in Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie* was meant to take the role of a "maker" of society. In Sidney's scheme of things, the poet was to play the role of a visionary with a moral end in view. Against this background, Spenser emerges as a poet who drew something from each of his predecessors. He used satire as also the native trends, following a humanist vein in his poetry.

3.4 SPENSER'S LIFE: THE MAN AND THE POET

Edmund Spenser was born in 1554, or a little earlier in London. Little is known about him except that he was related to the noble family of Spencer but his immediate family was poor. Unlike Philip Sidney who was heir to earldoms of Leicester and Warwick, Spenser earned the title of a gentleman purely on his educational merit. He attended the Merchant Taylor's school as a poor student and in 1569 joined Pembroke College, Cambridge University for his Bachelor of Arts. At Cambridge, too, he was given admission as a "sizar" or poor scholar student who had to perform menial duties. He received the degree in 1573 and proceeded to do Master of Arts completing it in 1576. Spenser carried no pretensions of being a gentleman even as he nurtured the ambition of becoming the poet laureate. On its side, Tudor England was marked by social mobility where men of ordinary birth and background dreamt of moving up the social ladder based on their education and literary skills. Spenser, too, hoped to acquire a respectable position in the court of England. During his years in Cambridge, Spenser gained vast knowledge of the classical Greek and Latin literature required for his poetic mission along with the English tradition of writing. He was familiar with the French and the Italian literatures as well. This combination of the various streams of knowledge enabled Spenser to forge new compositions of verse that carried his unique style. This aspect of Spenser's poetic art would be discussed in detail in the following unit.

While at Cambridge, Spenser became friends with Gabriel Harvey, a learned scholar on whose opinion and viewpoint he depended greatly. His letters to Harvey also reveal to us Spenser's ambitions and future

plans as he speaks freely to his friend on the subject. In 1578, Spenser served as secretary to the Bishop of Rochester, Thomas Young, who had been Master of Pembroke at the time Spenser studied there. Later, in 1579, he entered the service of the Earl of Leicester and made acquaintance with Philip Sidney who was the Earl's nephew. Spenser dedicated *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) to Sidney. In 1580, Spenser joined Arthur Grey de Wilton, the newly appointed governor to Ireland, in the capacity of secretary to the governor and left for Ireland. Grey was called back to England in 1582, but Spenser stayed on in Ireland for most of his life, serving in various official capacities. In 1584, he became deputy to the clerk of the Council of Munster in Ireland. This enabled Spenser to improve his circumstances considerably and in 1588 he acquired the possession of an estate, the estate of Kilcolman, which was earlier in the hands of the rebellious Irish Earl of Desmond. Spenser, along with Sir Walter Raleigh, went to Queen Elizabeth's court in 1589 following which he wrote the first three books of *The Faerie Queene*. In return for his valorization of the Queen, Spenser received a reward of an annuity of 50 pounds for life from the Queen's court. Spenser was not on good terms with the Queen's chief minister Lord Burghley, owing to latter's allegiance with the rival faction. He thus could not get any more favour from the Queen's court. Spenser's hostility towards the peer in his *Mother Hubberds Tale* is viewed as a clear reference of his antagonism towards Lord Burghley. One can win quite a few insights into Spenser's work and identify topical details that may serve as clues to the poet's opinions and preferences.

Spenser celebrates his love for Elizabeth Boyle in *Amoretti* and his marriage to her in *Epithalamion*; the two were published together in 1595. This was his second marriage. Spenser had been married earlier to one Machabyas Chylde in 1579. He came to England again in 1596 and during this period published the last three books of *The Faerie Queene*. In 1598, his fortunes reversed as Irish rebels attacked and took in possession his castle of Kilcolman. This happened at a time when Spenser had of late been designated Sheriff of Cork. He came back to England and died in 1599. A contemporary historian Camden tells us that Spenser was buried in Westminster Abbey near Chaucer's grave and his funereal was attended by many poets who threw poems in his tomb. This certainly was a tribute to the poet stature in English literature of the time.

3.5 SPENSER'S WORKS: A NOTE

Spenser began his writing career in 1569 with twenty-two verse translations of "Epigrams" and "Sonnets" published in *A Theatre wherein be represented as wel the miseries & calamities that follow the voluptuous Worldlings, As also the greate ioyes and pleasures which the faihtfull do enjoy*. Following this, he wrote *The Shepheardes Calender* anonymously which was published in 1579. The publication of Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* is considered a moment to reckon with that marked the beginning of Elizabethan poetic Renaissance. The book was a collection of twelve eclogues (short pastoral poems) organized along the twelve months of a year. Each poem bore the name of the month. It was a striking poetic experiment on Spenser's part. The calendar motif unified diverse subject matters and metre. It included, for example, the lament of a dejected lover hopelessly pursuing the beloved, the dialogue between age and youth, song contest for a rustic prize, celebration of great figures, an elegy, the struggle of a poet whose work remains unrewarded, juxtaposition of pastoral simplicity and corruption accompanied by greed. These eclogues operate as moral truths in the poem put forward to provide a perspective on the era to which Spenser belonged.

In 1590 Spenser came out with the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* that brought him instant fame and recognition. His "Letter to Raleigh" makes us aware about his plans to write *The Faerie Queene* as a long epic poem that was to be a collection of twelve books. It was to correspond with the twelve moral virtues as expounded by Aristotle. The poem centers on the figure of Arthur before he became king. Spenser intended to write a sequel to the epic poem as well that would project the political virtues befitting a King. These ambitions were not realized and Spenser could only write six books of *The Faerie Queene*. The first three books were published together with the dedication to the queen and his famous explanatory "Letter to Raleigh". In 1596 Books I to VI were published in London with an embellished dedication to Elizabeth I. *The Faerie Queene* is an example of historical allegory* (see glossary).

In 1591, Spenser published many short poems and several translations. These include “The Ruins of Time”, “The Teares of the Muses”, “Virgil’s Gnat”, “Prosopopoia or Mother Hubberds Tale”, “Ruines of Rome”, “Muiopotmos or the Fate of the Butterflie”, “Visions of the Worlds Vanitie”. These short works were collected in the volume *Complaints. Containing Sundrie Small Poemes of the Worlde’s Vanity*. In 1591 Spenser also wrote “Daphnaida, an Elegy upon the Death of the Noble and Virtuous Doughlas Howard”.

In 1595, Spenser published *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*. This volume also contained *Astrophel, a Pastorall Elegie upon the Death of the most Noble and valorous Knight, Sir Philip Sidney* by Spenser and other writers.

In 1595 *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* were published together. The former was written as a sonnet sequence of love poems and the latter was meant to celebrate his marriage with his beloved Elizabeth Boyle. In the following year, Spenser published the six books of *Faerie Queene*, as has been mentioned, and in 1596 he published *Fowre Hymns*. His *Prothalamion* was also published in the same year. Two Cantos of *Mutabilitie* (published in an edition of *The Faerie Queene*) and *A View of the Present State of Ireland* were published posthumously in 1609 and 1633 respectively.

Spenser wrote on a variety of subjects and engaged with different poetic forms in each of his works. It is not for nothing that Charles Lamb called him “the poet’s poet”. He was what a generation of poets in the later centuries wished to emulate.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has outlined the specific context of Edmund Spenser. A view has been provided of the historical phenomenon overtaking Europe. The cultural roots of the Renaissance have also been discussed in this unit. A view of the various intellectual trends that existed at the time has also been presented here. The literary history of the period preceding Spenser has been broadly outlined. This broadly constitutes the background of Spenser along with a mention of his long and short works. An effort has been made here to link up his writing with the trends and themes current in the world he inhabited.

3.7 GLOSSARY

Paganism: refers to the religious system of beliefs of the Roman Empire before the advent of the Christian religion that is during CE i.e Common Era. It was based on polytheism (worship of many gods) and involved reverence of nature.

Allegory: is a literary form that has a literal or primary level of meaning as also a secondary correlated level of signification. Allegories can be historical or political where characters represent historical personages and events.

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by Renaissance? In which specific country did it emerge and why?
2. Discuss Tudor poetry taking note of the various shifts that occurred within it.
3. Which poetic form did Wyatt introduce in England?
4. What do you understand by Reformation?

3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Arthos, John. *On the Poetry of Spenser and the Form of Romances*. Allen and Unwin, 1956.

2. Davis, B.E.C. *Edmund Spenser: A Critical Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1933.
3. Dean, Leonard ed. *Renaissance Poetry*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1961.
4. Evans, Maurice. *English Poetry in the Sixteenth Century*, London: Hutchinson University Library, 1955.
5. Spenser. "Letter to Raleigh". *Edmund Spenser's Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Hugh Maclean, and Anne Lake Prescott. New York: Norton, 1993.



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Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit would provide a critical assessment of Spenser's poetry with respect to three sonnets that occur in his work *Amoretti*. These are in your course. The unit would include appreciations of the mentioned sonnets as also give a general understanding of the poem *Amoretti*. You will be able to identify the sonnet form as used by Elizabethan poets and also gain an understanding of the Spenserian sonnet in particular.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Edmund Spenser brought into being a now familiar art form called the Spenserian stanza. It is lyrical, measured, and greatly controlled. After a couple of centuries the English Romantic poets looked back to Spenser as a model of versification. The nineteenth century realized the potential of Spenser for enlivening and refreshing Romantic poetry in the hands of Keats and Byron as practitioners of the Spenserian verse. In addition, Spenser is known as the poet of allegory that is most visible in *The Faerie Queene* and *The Shepherdes Calendar*.

4.2 SPENSER'S POETIC ART

Spenser consciously deployed many archaic forms in his poetry that belonged to old and medieval English language. This was meant to lend an air of antiquity to his poetry. It was a conscious act on his part since he planned to carry the old traditions of English life in his writing for gaining legitimacy in a world of sharp contradictions and clashes. For this reason it has been suggested that:

Spenser was innovative and archaizing in his language: he coined many new words and played—often fancifully—with the native and foreign etymologies of English words. He thus participated in a project dear to the hearts of many educated Elizabethan writers—a project of “enriching” the vernacular with borrowings from classical and modern languages and dialects in order to create a “kingdom of our own language” as Spenser called it in a letter to his friend Gabriel Harvey. (Ferguson, Margaret, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy, Ed. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Fourth Ed. New York: Norton, 1996. 147)

In a letter written to Walter Raleigh, Spenser had expressed his idea of what a poet should be and the role he was to play in contemporary society. He wrote to Raleigh that “The general end therefore of all the

booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline” (ed. Maclean, and Anne Lake Prescott. New York: Norton, 1993. Pp 1-5.,1). Spenser believed that good literature had the important role of “fashioning” a gentleman (shaping the personality) and leading one to become both virtuous and gentle. The New Historicist critic Stephan Greenblatt has made an interesting observation on the idea of self-fashioning during the Renaissance in his book *Renaissance Self-fashioning*. He claims that “In sixteenth century England there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned” which means there was awareness among Renaissance writers that they could carve out their best selves with practice. This of course was a result of the specific changes taking place in society. Greenblatt expands the point to say: “There is in early modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities”. Thus even as Spenser spoke of ‘fashioning’ gentleman as the goal of poetry, he was also attempting ‘self-fashioning’ that is shaping and structuring his own life and persona. From an ordinary man with little family inheritance, Spenser became an important gentleman with colonial estate in Ireland. For Greenblatt, “self fashioning” was an important literary trait in the Elizabethan writing. It brought in people for discussion who inherited no title and managed to attain a place for themselves in society. These figures involved “submission to an absolute power or authority situated at least partially outside the self—God, a sacred book, an institution”. In the specific case of Spenser, Greenblatt notes that “Spenser is one of the first English writers to have what we may call a field theory of culture, that is, the conception of a nation not simply as an institutional structure or a common race but as a complex network of beliefs [and] folk customs”. In Greenblatt’s opinion, it is a shaping of identity of the nation at large and building a culture that would preserve moral idealism. We might take it further to say that to build this culture is the purpose and role of the poet for Spenser. The use of allegory, repetition, formal style and high diction are all part of Spenser’s ‘civilizing’ mission. He built a new aesthetic of writing and was a conscious poet weighing and valuing words to convince as also move people.

Spenser wished to be recognized as a modern poet who belonged to the changing times. It was his endeavour to represent society justly and appreciatively. He experimented with the poetic form and made it capable of expressing new developments in his society. The Spenserian sonnet is a result of that experimentation which later augmented a new canon of English poetry. Imagine that the sonnet was new to English writing and it required careful handling. Lyricism and folk culture would be an odd mix and in Spenser’s hands the form gained freshness of spirit and appeal. It moved nearer to the English idiom and broadened the scope of poetic expression. It dwelt neither on narrative nor moralizing. Instead, it focused upon the mental state of an emotional person taken up with the urge to live and express.

With Spenser England enters the new age of poetry leaving behind the conventionality and mediocrity of the medieval period. It is often remarked that he was the first real English poet after Chaucer to have become a representative voice of Elizabethan England. He is the forerunner of Shakespeare and Milton, anticipating them and enthusing them to go in for exploration of human psyche. He is also known as the national poet of England writing poems that presented the grandeur of the English kingdom and the rule of the queen. Samuel Taylor Coleridge has suggested:

In Spenser we see the brightest and purest form of that nationality which was so common a characteristic of our elder poets. There is nothing unamiable, nothing contemptuous of others, in it. to glorify their country—to elevate England into a queen, an empress of the heart—this was their passion and object. (Coleridge, Samuel T. “Spenser’s Art”. *Poetry A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed.Hugh Maclean, and Anne Lake Prescott. New York: Norton, 1993.pp 668-71.671)

That is what the nation needed at the time and Spenser filled that gap in English poetry. We may take help from Coleridge to say that, “In Spenser the spirit of chivalry is entirely predominant, although with a much greater infusion of the poet’s own individual self into it than is found in any other writer. He has the wit of the southern with the deeper inwardness of the northern genius” (668). The purity of emotion and feeling as also the spontaneity with which he writes makes Spenser a northern genius. Add to this the ability to fantasize that comes from the mysterious and myth-filled regions of north England. These

render a dreamlike quality to his poems. That is why the pastoral—dear to northern dwellers—becomes a constant reference point in Spenser. Subtlety of language and fineness of art as also the elegance of London as a city of vibrant culture bring to him the wit and acumen of southern urban poet.

Spenser wrote with seriousness of purpose and rarely gave in to frivolity. Writing poetry was no fancy or pastime for him—he wrote it as a part of his duty. The critic Richard Helgerson has observed that “Spenser’s literary contemporaries were gentlemen for whom poetry was a mere ribbon in the cap of youth”. That was not the case with Spenser. Indeed, Spenser’s attitude of serious engagement with poetic expression distinguished him from other new poets who were self-indulgent. Helgerson adds that “A Sidney, a Lodge, or a Harington might defend poetry in the highest terms, proclaiming its divine origin and advertising its civilizing effect, but when these men spoke of their own work it was either with humorous and graceful disdain or with some more serious uncertainty”. In comparison with them, “Not only did Spenser maintain his view with a resolutely sage seriousness, as Sidney never did, he also illustrated it triumphantly in the first three books of *The Faerie Queene*” (Helgerson, Richard. “The New Poet Presents Himself”. *Edmund Spenser’s Poetry A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Hugh Maclean, and Anne Lake Prescott. New York: Norton, 1993. Pp. 675-86. 677).

4.3 THE SONNET FORM

A sonnet in Italian means a “little sound or song” consisting of fourteen lines traditionally, and written in iambic pentameter (“iamb” is a metrical foot which has an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable). It adheres to a specific rhyme scheme and has a compact structure bound by a tight thematic concern. The classical form of the sonnet was provided by the Italian scholar Petrarch and is known as the Petrarchan sonnet that was divided into two stanzas—a first eight-line stanza called an octave and the final six-line stanza known as the sestet. It has a set rhyme scheme—abba, abba, cdecde /cdcdcd. In the Petrarchan sonnet, the first eight lines present a problem, an argument or observation. The final stanza changes the direction of the sonnet and there occurs a shift, turn or “volta” from the foregoing argument. The sestet becomes a counter argument, answer or clarification of the octave. The English poet Thomas Wyatt introduced the sonnet form in England in early sixteenth century. He translated Petrarch’s sonnets and wrote his own as well. Wyatt returned from Italy having read Petrarch and was full of zeal to bring the sonnet form to England. He wrote over thirty sonnets and twenty-five of them were directly drawn from Petrarch. He closely followed the Petrarchan model of the sonnet—an octave with two rhymes and a sestet that is split into two, consisting of a quatrain and a final couplet. However, Wyatt’s tone was more colloquial and dramatic as compared to that of Petrarch who was formal in style. Also, Petrarch in his sonnet idealized the beloved. In Wyatt, that idealism of love was not always present. In fact, the purity of love experience is almost always punctured by the poet. This is certainly an English addition. Since irony had strong roots in England, from Chaucer, it found its way in the love poetry written in the period.

4.4 COURTLY LOVE SONNET

The predominant sonnet type that appealed to the Elizabethan love poets was the courtly love sonnet or lyric. Wyatt was the forerunner of the love sonnet that he introduced to the English court audience. The conventional courtly love sonnet taken from Italian poetry had as its subject the pining lover and the beautiful but pitiless beloved. Generally, the sonnet would provide the image of a man pleading with a girl to respond to his love. He would display his love-sick self, dwell on the charms of the girl and plead her to take pity on him. This expression of love was deployed by English poets as well but they combined it with other literary traditions and attitudes. They picked up, for instance, the Chaucerian style and weaved it with the Italian. Wyatt’s sonnet “They Flee from Me” is a case in point. The sonnet offers an interpretation of love and the beloved, and is not merely an outburst of the lover’s emotion.

4.5 THE SPENSERIAN STANZA

The Spenserian stanza was a result of Spenser’s unique style that he experimented with in his *The Faerie Queene*. It was a verse form used for the first time in England that consisted of eight lines written in

iambic pentameter and the ninth line of six iambic feet which is called the alexandrine. The rhyme scheme of a typical Spenserian stanza is ababbcbcc. To evolve this unique stanza form, Spenser combined various poetic patterns from contemporary Europe as also from those belonging to the old tradition of poetry. He used the traditional French ballade (which was an eight-line stanza) along with Italian stanza that is the eight-line iambic pentameter and combined these with the Chaucerian stanza of the Monk's tale in *The Canterbury Tales* (eight lines with rhyme scheme—ababbcbc). The Spenserian stanza became popular during the Elizabethan age and later during the Romantic period when the younger Romantic poets—Byron, Keats and Shelley used them effectively in several of their poems.

4.6 A NOTE ON *AMORETTI*

Spenser's poem *Amoretti* which means "little loves" in Italian is a sequence of eighty-nine sonnets that were published in 1595, together with his marriage ode *Epithalamion* in a single volume. It is believed that Spenser wrote *Amoretti* for his bride to be Elizabeth Boyle and *Epithalamion* (literally meaning "on the bridal bed chamber") as a celebration of their marriage that is supposed to have taken place in the summer of 1594. *Amoretti*, in this sense, is a love poem that records the poet's courtship with Elizabeth Boyle. The poem carries the distinct style of Spenser.

As has been suggested earlier, the Petrarchan sonnet was a popular form of love poetry. Spenser, however, did not follow the Petrarchan model. The latter projected an ideal beloved who remained an ever unattainable figure for the pining lover. Spenser was not writing his poems for some unattainable mistress but his beloved and wife to be. He thus wrote of the relationship between the man and the woman as a playful game or as a lover's claim. For Spenser, love was not limited to desire expressed by the lover who would be floored by the beauty of the divine mistress. She was viewed as desirable but also earthly and material as a "deer" (see sonnet 67). In Spenser's scheme of things, love was meant to be realized in attaining a union with the object of affection. However, union with the beloved would be threatened by death and time's natural course. To counter this, the lover in Spenser displays restlessness as also vouches for his genuine love that he would immortalize in poetry. All the episodes captured in sonnets make *Amoretti* not an idealistic but a realistic love poem. It may be noted, too, that the poem is presented from the point of view of the male subject. It highlights male desire and fantasy projecting the thrill of chasing the beloved who is seen as an object that needs to be won and possessed. One could also see that the woman in Spenser is wild and not divine. She cannot be tamed by the man unless she wishes to join him out of her own will. She is also the one speaking to the immature lover about mortality and its inevitability. Her philosophical ideas make the poet restless who wishes to leave a mark on the times to come through the act of writing poetry. Thus, the woman subject is shown to be unruly on the one hand, and calm on the other. This duality is an essential attribute of Spenser's poetry that makes use of oxymoron and paradox to present a more holistic picture of people and things. Lastly, the rhyme scheme used by Spenser in the poem is: ababbcbccdcdee. The frequency of rhymes that repeat makes this verse form a complex one.

However, *Amoretti* is not entirely based on the love experience and its many shades. It projects the predicament of the poet as well. The poem constantly oscillates between Spenser's private love and public poetic duty towards the nation and the queen. We understand that by the time Spenser was writing the 80th sonnet of *Amoretti*, he had already completed six books of *The Faerie Queen*. This suggests that even while writing *Amoretti* that confesses his love for his fiancée, the poet had in mind his poetic duty towards the country. Even within *Amoretti*, he displays his dilemma between the private emotion and his public image. With this in view, let's now take a look at the sonnets in the course followed by an explanation that should help you situate the poem in the overall context of Spenser's poetry.

4.7 SONNET LVII

Sweet warrior when shall I have peace with you?
High time it is, this warre now ended were:

Which I no lenger can endure to sue,
 Ne your incessant battry more to beare:
 So weake my powres, so sore my wounds appeare,
 That wonder is how I should live a jot,
 Seeing my hart through-launched every where
 With thousand arrowes, which your eies have shot:
 Yet shoot ye sharpely still, and spare me not,
 But glory thinke to make these cruel stoures.
 Ye cruell one, what glory can be got,
 In slaying him that would live gladly yours?
 Make peace therefore, and graunte me timely grace,
 That al my wounds would heale in little space.

4.7.1 Explanation

Sonnet 57 begins on the note of weariness felt by the lover who has run out of stamina, though not the will to woo the beloved. He can no longer endure the beloved's "incessant battry," a reference to her anger or protests, and has grown weak. The wounds of the lover are sore, too.

The suggestion of the first line is that the lover and the beloved have been at war as opponents since a long time where none has yielded. The lover didn't cease to pursue nor did the beloved succumb to his supplications. War as a metaphor works well, too, for the lover is trying to win in vain. But the quest is to win the battle against the sharp adversary who is also the object of desire. The paradox makes the sonnet more significant as it adds to the fineness of the love emotion. The warrior is sweet and yet a reminder that one is armed. Here the beloved is the warrior who is armed with arrows that hit the lover and the lover's heart has been pierced "with thousand arrows". Thus, the latter has been wounded like one in battle "sore my wounds appeare".

The reference to "high time it is" is a common Renaissance reference that adds urgency to the scene. The experience is short-lived and must be captured and enjoyed to its full—*Carpe Diem* i.e. cease the day became a popular ploy for love poets. It also made a larger comment on life and its unpredictability. Here, an added sense is given that the conventional stages of love and its protestations have been passed and now the time to unite is come.

In this sonnet, the beloved is visualized by the lover-poet as "sweet warriour." The term is used by the poet to pacify her so that she ceased to be angry with him and thus his life was spared. On our part as readers, we shall appreciate the poem adequately enough only when the love-lorn poet was imagined as a helpless creature. It is a case of the hunted bearing the pain in the manner of a game that he plays to earn "peace with you" successfully.

Here, Elizabethan language is made to serve the greater purpose of depicting human emotions that had hitherto drawn strength from the divine source. There is no longer mystery and conjecture in the exchange between the lovers. They come together as contending figures for earning sweet union. The reach of the human emotion is made sensuous because of the link it establishes with nature. The query can be made whether emotion is primarily in the human heart or the mythical aspect of the surrounding nature. The answer is that both human and nature are intertwined. Nature manifests itself in human form as love and longing. Further, the figure of the beloved is available to the man in terms of "slaying" demons and cruelly hurting bodies.

"Sweet warriour" is an oxymoron, a combination of antonyms. Here, it heightens the effect of a woman who treats her pursuer cruelly. Her act is supposed to enhance her appeal and make her still more beautiful. The sonnet follows the convention of the Petrarchan sonnet in Italy to some extent. We might also mark the metaphor of the hunt at the centre of which is situated cruelty. This, too, is constituted in

her indifference towards him, as also the annoyance she exhibits when pursued by him. The poet-lover is subjected to such a cruelty and violence by the woman-hunter. The list of words denoting “sweet violence” is long indeed. “Warre,” “battry,” “arrows,” “cruell,” “wounds” and “slaying” are some examples. The poet as victim presents the figure of a helpless man who does not know how to win the “grace” of the woman he adores. He argues towards the end that he would be her obedient servant ever ready to carry out that which is demanded of him.

Yet, the weapons with which the beautiful woman attacks the poet-lover are her “eyes” that shoot him with their arrows. For this reason, the more he is attacked, the more smitten he becomes. The sensuousness hidden in the supposed “peace” between the two lovers is crafted in the sonnet around his “acceptance” by the woman lover.

4.8 SONNET LXVII

Lyke as a huntsman after weary chace,
Seeing the game from him escapt away,
Sits downe to rest him in some shady place,
With panting hounds beguiled of their prey:
So after long pursuit and vain assay,
When I all weary had the chace forsooke,
The gentle deare returnd the selfe-same way,
Thinking to quench her thirst at the next brooke.
There she beholding me with mylder looke,
Sought not to fly, but fearlesse still did bide:
Till I in hand her yet halfe trembling tooke,
And with her owne goodwill hir firmly tyde.
Strange thing, me seem'd, to see a beast so wyld,
So goodly wonne, with her own will beguyld.

4.8.1 Explanation

In sonnet 67, the metaphor is of the gentle deer being chased by the hunter and his hounds. Here the poet is exploring the uneasy relationship shared between the lover and the object of love, the woman. He begins with the allegory/analogy of a chase where he is the huntsman and the woman his prey, a deer. The image of the hunter and the prey evokes many interpretations. One, the hunter hunts for pleasure and the chase brings him thrill. Two, he hunts to devour the animal of chase and satisfy his hunger. Still, he hunts to assert his power over the prey that he wishes to win over as a prize. All these interpretations are equally true for the woman as much as they are for the deer.

Significantly, the deer is a fast-running “beast so wild”. The wildness of the deer is emphasized here as the huntsman is tired. The vain effort of the hunter discourages him to follow the deer. The pursuit was hot but the venture proved unsuccessful. As was the case in the earlier sonnet, the poet persona expresses his weariness in wooing the beloved. He is on the verge of accepting defeat as the line suggests— “Seeing the game from him escapt away”. He has chased the deer with his friend-hounds without victory, and is left listless. Out of weariness, the hunter decides to rest in the cool shade of a tree.

The sonnet is dramatic in nature as it evokes a scene and a picture. However, it is not a static picture meant for description alone. The picture moves when under the poetic effort, the immediate moment comes alive the same way things take place. Spenser sets the scene with the hunter taking rest in shade momentarily. The poet-lover adds movement to it by way of the deer coming to the same place to drink water. When aimed to be hunted, the same deer would flee. But now, as the hunter has stopped chasing the deer, it, too, is undaunted and stops at the river to quench “her thirst”. In this manner, the deer lets the huntsman capture her. The failure of the huntsman’s effort had made him sad and diffident. This is the

moment when the deer decides to join him back to make him happy. The deer is presented as both gentle and wild in the sonnet that typifies Spenserian poetic art of contradictions. However, the gentle attribute adds to the beauty of the deer and makes it more admirable. The wild characteristic of it ignites passions in the lover which also challenges him to seize and control the prey. The inability of the lover to control the deer by way of hunting has been proven here. Note that the wild one turns gentle out of her will. The woman's will is in this sense emphasized in the sonnet. Also the idea gets further clear that she cannot be won by force but by surrender and softness. Finally, she takes pity on the man and joins him.

For Spenser, this reflects the deer's concern for its hunter. Apparently, it creates an ironical and a strange situation. The same is suggested by the poet himself who says "strange thing me seem'd". Here, we face two aspects. One, why would a prey come to a huntsman? Two, the poet-lover, finds it strange as he wonders how a wild beast of such energy and vigour could finally turn of its own accord into a sweet and friendly figure "so goodly wonne."? What indeed is the case? We know that in the metaphor, the hunter and the hunted are inseparable, they are presented as lovers who cannot possibly part from each other for long. In such a situation, they will finally join. That is the pattern we note here. The deer comes back, chooses to quench its thirst from the small stream near the resting place of the young hunter. The clear suggestion is that inherent in the chase was the bond of love between the two. This transformed them into confident companions. Towards the end of the sonnet, the two become loving partners in the bond, as they hold each other's hands and enjoy the moment of togetherness. Also the woman is finally tamed symbolized in the wild deer becoming a tame creature and kind as well. For Spenser, it becomes a testimony to the common concern each has for the other, a subject for celebration. We also observe that the two sonnets discussed so far apparently work against the unity in love but prove to be inching towards close communion.

4.9 SONNET LXXV

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away:
Agayne I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tyde, and made my paynes his pray.
"Vayne man," sayd she, "that doest in vaine assay,
A mortall thing so to immortalize,
For I my selve shall lyke to this decay,
And eek my name bee wyped out lykewize."
"Not so," quod I, "let baser things devize,
To dy in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,
And in the hevens wryte your glorious name:
Where whenas death shall all the world subdew,
Our love shall live, and later life renew.

4.9.1 Explanation

Sonnet 75 is different from the sonnets discussed above. The chase and hunter metaphor of the earlier sonnets has been replaced by the declaration of love. The sonnet opens with the image of human assertion and its fate at the hands of nature. The attempt to write the beloved's name on the sand at the beach and the same being erased by the waves is the case in point. This immediately evokes the idea of death that human beings cannot control nor turn their own fate away from it. Note that the sonnet is presented in the form of a dialogue. The beloved and the lover are both provided a voice and character.

The sonnet exhibits a different characteristic in that it presents the lovers as human individuals talking to each other about immortality. The question raised is whether the transitory nature of human love can be changed into a phenomenon of permanence. On the face, it appears impossible. See the use of a name being written on "the strand", the wet sand on the seashore, that is soon swept off by a new wave of the

sea. When the lover writes the name of the beloved again, that, too, is wiped off soon. The situation creates a sense of sadness in the lover. His terminology betrays violence hidden in fate. Fate, indeed, “made my paynes his pray.” The idea of hunter is here transferred from the beloved in the previous two sonnets to fate that is “preying” on the emotions of the lover. In contrast, with the two previous sonnets, the woman assumes the role of a sympathetic figure. She explains to the poet that all in the world is subject to decay. According to her, she, too, is a part of this grand scheme of decline and will likewise “bee wyped out.” Suddenly, as if through a miracle, the poet bursts forth into a seer. He recognizes the sweep of art. If the magic of poetry were applied to the existing phenomenon of change, mortal things would become immortal. To his mind, all depends upon the working of art and the emotion of love that renders things immortal. Thus, his verse will “eternize” her “virtues.” Her name written in heaven’s name would renew the destruction that death is to cause initially. We might identify in this sonnet the power of art and love that transcended the phenomenon of nature. The sonnet also holds the beloved in high esteem who “shall live in fame” while all other “baser things” in contrast would “dy in dust” This also offers a larger comment on Spenser’s own art and its worth for the poet. In the act of immortalizing the beloved, the lover would also immortalize himself. For Spenser this is the value of poetry. It can live through centuries even when the person writing it is long dead. Spenser in this sense is a self-conscious poet who is aware of his role and the value of artistic creation in life.

4.10 LET US SUM UP

This unit has offered a discussion of Spenser’s unique poetic art. The sonnet form as it emerged in England has been elaborated. How the English sonnet borrowed heavily from the Italian sonnet of Petrarch has also been outlined. The Spenserian stanza as it emerged in England has been dealt with in the unit. A view of Spenser’s poem *Amoretti* is provided followed by a discussion of the three sonnets in the course.

4.11 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note of the Spenserian Stanza.
2. Is *Amoretti* a love poem? Discuss the idea of love as projected by Spenser in it. How is it different from the Petrarchan sonnet?
3. What according to Spenser was the role and aim of a poet in the Elizabethan period?

4.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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