

Chaucer's Realism

Literature reflects the tendencies of the age in which it is produced and there is always a great literary artist who becomes the mouth-piece of his Age and gives expression to its hopes and aspirations, its fads and fetishes, its fears and doubts, its prosperity and enterprise in his works. Such an artist was Alexander Pope in the XVIII century, and such a poet was Alfred Tennyson in the Victorian Age. Pope faithfully represents his Age, its social and literary tendencies in the poems such as 'The Rape of the Lock', 'Dunciad', 'Essay on Man' and 'Essay on Criticism'. In 'The Rape of the Lock' the poet directs his attention to the fashions and amours of the ladies of fashion represented by Arabella Fermor, and to the foppishness and gay frivolities of the courtiers and men of social disposition. In the 'Essay on Man', Pope gives express

ion to the philosophical thought of his Age, as had been propounded by Bolingbroke. 'The proper study of mankind is man' and it is no use delving deep into the mysteries of creation and the works of the 'Divine Being'. Pope writes for the materialistic people of his times to whom the mysticism of Blake and the subtleties of Berkeley were incomprehensible things. In 'The Dunciad' Pope let loose the floodgates of scurrilous satire presenting the political strife of the times and the low moral standards to which the wits had fallen in those days.

Like Pope, Tennyson was equally the mouth piece of the Victorian Society and represented the ideals, traditions, hopes and aspirations of the people. He reflected the fancies and sentiments of Victorian England. To quote W.J. Long, "For nearly half a century Tennyson was not a man and a poet, he was a

voice, the voice of a whole people expressing in exquisite melody, their doubts and their faith, their griefs and their triumphs!" In 'The Princess' the poet undertook to grapple with one of the rising questions of the day, that is the higher education of women and their place in the fast changing conditions of society. His Locksley Hall of 1842 is full of the restless spirit of 'young England' and of its faith in science, commerce and trade, while its sequel, Locksley Hall sixty years after 1886 shows ~~the~~ the reversion of feeling which had occurred in many minds when the rapid development of science seemed to threaten the very foundations of religion and commerce was filling the world with the sordid greed of gain. In 'The Palace of Art' the poet describes and condemns the spirit of aestheticism and Pre-Raphaelitism, whose sole religion

was the worship of Beauty and Knowledge for their own sake. "Maud gives a dramatic rendering of the revolt of a cultured mind against the hypocrisy and corruptions of a society degraded by the worship of Mammon", his 'Gylfiss of the King' reveals another deep conviction of his Age - "the spreading mischief of moral taint". In another poem, 'In Memoriam', the poet traces the triumph of 'Faith and Scepticism'. In all these ways Tennyson represents the Victorian Age.

Chaucer represents his own Age and holds the mirror to the life of his time. He is as truly the social chronicler of England in the late 14th century as Froissart, is the political and military chronicler of France during the same period. His poetry reflects the fourteenth century not in fragments but as a complete whole. Other poets of his

Age direct their gaze and attention to only certain limited aspects of the time, for example, the unknown author of Pearl shows us the mysticism of refined minds, Wyclif, the surging wave of religious reformation, power, the fear produced in the wealthier class by the peasant rising, Barbour, the break between the literature of Scotland and of England and the advent of patriotic Scottish poetry and England the corruption in the church and the religious order. Each of these authors throws light only on one aspect of fourteenth century life. It is Chaucer's greatness that he directs his comprehensive gaze not on one aspect only of his times, but on all its wide and variegated life. He is the wide and capacious soul and he takes a fuller view of his times more than anyone else could have taken in those days. Chaucer gives us

a direct transcription of reality and a true picture of daily life as it was actually lived in its most familiar aspects. Chaucer symbolises the Middle Ages, and his world is medieval. But beneath the medievalism the heaven of the Renaissance is already at work, and the poet stands at the dividing of ways, linking himself with the old world of medievalism that was passing away and heralding the birth of the new age that was peeping at the horizon.

The end.

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