UNIT 3 THE AGE OF CHAUCER

Structure

3.0   OBJECTIVES

Our aim in this unit is to provide an overview of the age in which Geoffrey Chaucer lived and wrote. He was the outstanding English poet of the late Middle Ages. Since literature and society are closely related, this background will help you understand Chaucer's poetry. Background or context is particularly important here since the medieval world was very different from our own.

3.1   INTRODUCTION

The unit will introduce you to the different aspects of the world of the late Middle Ages. It was an age of transition from declining feudalism to an emerging money-economy. The Norman Conquest in 1066 had brought in French words, literary conventions and artistic tastes. Historical events in the fourteenth century undermined the older chivalric, aristocratic culture. The growth of trade and commerce led to the growth of London. Apart from the conventions of romance and realism, Chaucer's times also saw the revival of alliterative verse, the vehicle of social and moral protest.

3.2   HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The poetry of Chaucer and his contemporaries is best understood in the context of the transition in European society from declining feudalism to an emerging money-economy characterised by the rise of the middle classes. Although the English people still largely lived in small, self-sufficient villages, the very fact that Chaucer was an urban poet already suggests a change. Here we need to remember that unlike France, England had broken out of the feudal system rather early.

We could begin by taking a preliminary look at the growing importance and wealth of towns because of trade and commerce. Because of the lucrative wool trade, agricultural land was being converted at many places into pasture for rearing sheep. This required fewer farm-hands, giving rise to a gradual exodus of labour from country to town, from farming to the craft-gilds. Of course, such processes of social transformation do not take place abruptly: in the reign of Henry VIII, Thomas More continues to attack the 'enclosure' system, that is, the conversion of arable land into pasture. But at least three historical events can be identified which accelerated change: the Hundred Years' War, the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt.

In a sense the Hundred Years' War between England and France (beginning in 1337) is rooted in the feudal structure of European society. The modern nation-state comes into being in the transition from medieval to Renaissance Europe. Before that, through matrimonial alliances Kings were feudal lords of land and property in foreign countries and often laid claim to their thrones. The basic cause of dispute between England and France was thus the English possessions on French soil. War with France and Scotland brought honour to the English monarchy but drained the resources of the Crown, making the barons more powerful. In the changing situation, the barons often included the magnates and comparatively recent merchant princes. After the deposition and murder of the weak and wilful king, Edward II, Edward III decided to recover prestige through foreign campaigns, and for some time, succeeded in catching the popular imagination. Flanders, the biggest customer for English wool, appealed for aid to Edward in their conflict with the King of France. Edward's alliances against France in the Netherlands and the Rhineland (Germany) were matched by the counter-alliances of Philip VI, the French monarch. The immediate pretext of the protracted Hundred Years' War was Edward's claim to the French throne through his mother, Isabella, challenging that of Philip VI. It is ironic that the same Philip had been crowned in 1327 and Edward had done homage to him for Gascony in 1329.

A series of victories bolstered English pride in the mid-fourteenth century. The victory at Crécy (1346), where English yeomen archers and Welsh knifemen routed French chivalry, was immediately followed by the crushing defeat of the Scots at Neville's Cross. Military glory and patriotic fanaticism that accompanied these successes reached a peak in the triumph of the Black Prince, son of Edward, over the French near Poitiers (1356), where the French king was taken prisoner. The peace of Bretigny in 1360 made Edward ruler of one-third of France, but the financial burden of the war began to tell on England. The intervention in Spain proved to be unwise, since despite the Black Prince's last victory against Spain at Nájera (1367), the war dragged on, and reverses mounted upon reverses until finally England was left with only a foothold around Calais and a weakened navy.

Ultimately what the Hundred Years' War did was to change the old code of chivalry: Shakespeare brings this out ironically in his history plays (the second tetralogy from *Richard II* to *Henry V*). Edward I and Edward III in a sense created the modern infantry. The yeoman archer, the development of a local militia at home and something akin to modern conscription gave the English soldiers a definite edge over the French. The situation on the battlefield contributed to the emergence of democratic forces in England. The sense of a people's will, representing the rise of the English people with all their proud defiance, presents a sharp contrast to the French peasants' situation, and adds new life to the poetry of Chaucer. More immediately, the looting and pillage of France by English soldiers, that Chaucer must have witnessed in his French campaigns, may well have resulted in his sympathy for the helpless.

The war, which had brought prosperity to various classes in England because of the rich booty and high wages for soldiers, suffered a severe check from the Black Death (1348-49), a deadly form of the highly infectious bubonic plague carried across Europe by black rats. Because of insanitary conditions, it affected towns more than villages, and the poor died everywhere like flies. Probably one-third of England's population perished in the plague. Abating towards the end of 1349, the epidemic revived in 1361, 1362 and 1369, continuing to break out sporadically until the late seventeenth century, when medical science improved and the black rat was driven out by the brown rat, which did not carry the disease.

The high mortality at once increased the demand for labour on the farm and weakened the obligations of feudal tenure. This situation found a parallel among the clergy. Many livings (ecclesiastical posts) fell vacant, and the clergy often supported the labourers' demand for higher wages. It is thus not surprising that Chaucer's

Franklin was a freeholder and that even his Plowman had acquired a new freedom enabling him to offer his services to others. The devastation, however, failed to dampen the martial ardour of the king and his barons. Even as the Black Death was raging, Edward III developed his Order of the Garter which became the model for all later chivalric orders.

It was thus a time of political unrest and uncertainty: we must not forget that two kings, Edward III and Richard II, were deposed and murdered in the fourteenth century. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 has to be seen in this background. But first let us have some idea of the condition of the poor in England. In 1381, more than half the people did not possess the privileges that had been guaranteed to every 'freeman' by the Magna Carta (1215) in the reign of King John. The serf and the villein had the status of livestock in the master's household, although the above-mentioned factors had started to push them out of bondage to the comparative freedom of crafts in towns. In theory the labourers had an elected representative, the Reeve, supposedly to counterbalance the Steward or Bailiff. But as the wealth of the towns often drew away an absentee landlord, the Reeve as substitute became a feared enemy of the people, as in the portraits of Chaucer and Langland. The poor had to pay fines for marriage or sending a son to school, and the inhuman *heriot* or mortuary tax exacted at death-bed was responsible for much resentment.

The immediate provocation for the revolt was the Poll Tax or head tax. The financial burden of the wars forced the government to ask Parliament to allow heavy taxes. But since such taxes usually affected the propertied classes which dominated Parliament, in 1380, taxes were levied on even the poorest. The sudden outbreak of rebellion under the leadership of Wat Tyler resulted in the peasants, accustomed to levies for French campaigns, attacking London, destroying property and putting the Archbishop of Canterbury to death. The uprising collapsed equally suddenly, partly because of the shrewdness and courage of King Richard II, who promptly went back on his promises as soon as the rebels had dispersed. Although the movement failed, it was for the first time that the poor peasant had fought for his basic right of freedom; there was very little looting in the Revolt. Despite a brief reference to it in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, Chaucer concerns himself with the sufferings of individual poor men and not the poor in bulk. For the portrayal of the rural proletariat as opposed to the prosperous farmer class which also grew at that time, we have to go to Langland.

What was the situation in the towns? Apart from London, all English towns were smaller than those of industrialized Flanders and northern Italy. A medium-sized English town would have only 3,000 or 4,000 inhabitants, and town and country flowed into one another. They were fortified by walls since there were no policemen in the modern sense. Their social and economic life was dominated by the merchants and the gilds. The merchant gilds were the most powerful and important: the craft gilds took second place. Parish gilds were also organised for charitable work. Often engaged in rivalry and competition--in the thirteen-eighties there was virtually a war between the older food-trade gilds and the newer cloth gilds- the gilds were easily identified by their distinctive liveries. They also competed with each other to put up on Feast days the colourful pageantry of Miracles and Moralities, drama based on the Bible and saints' lives.

While working at the Custom-House and living over the Aldgate Tower, Chaucer came to know and love this colourful London life. He would have noticed churches as well as taverns around him: we may note in passing that the pilgrimage to the Canterbury Cathedral (in *The Canterbury Tales*) begins at the Tabard Inn. London was a busy town of about 40,000 people with a certain openness about its markets and shops. Apart from churches and splendid houses of noblemen, the ordinary citizens' and artisans' dwellings had an equally arresting variety. Most of them were of timber and plaster with only side-gables of masonry to prevent the spreading of fires. The ground floor was generally open to the street and outside stairs seem to have been common. There was little comfort or privacy, and instead of glass, the

windows had wooden shutters. Since such shutters and weak walls made eavesdropping and housebreaking easy, and streets were unlit, wanderers at night were severely punished. Furniture was kept at the barest minimum. There was generally only one bedroom; for most of the household, the house meant simply the hall. But the common life of the hall was declining among the upper classes with increasing wealth and material comfort. The energy and excitement of London was primarily outdoors, in the street, which was the scene of royal processions and tournaments, the Mayor's annual ride as well as crime and riot.

3.3   CULTURAL BACKGROUND

As it is well known, Chaucer divides society into the three conventional estates—the knight (nobility), the working man (the third estate) and the ecclesiastic (the church). The fact that he leaves out the two extremes of aristocracy and serfdom suggests a deliberate choice of a bourgeois perspective: he observes society mainly through the eyes of the rising middle classes. At the same time, his irony is also directed at them. This technique enables him to capture the old and the new in his time with rare subtlety. He begins in *The Canterbury Tales* fairly high in the ecclesiastical hierarchy with the Prioress and the Monk, then come the Friar and the Nun's Priest or Chaplain, then the Parson and the Clerk, then the Summoner and the Pardoner.

Perhaps no other element in Chaucer's world brings out the gap between the ideal and the actual as the code of chivalry and the conventions of courtly love. Harking back to pagan morality, chivalry anticipates the concept of the modern gentleman. The true and perfect knight was distinguished by fearless strength, charity and faith. Actually the knights had been only mounted soldiers and not much more. In 1095, Pope Urban II in Rome exhorted the knights of the First Crusade on their way to the Holy Land to give up cruelty and greed in favour of Christian values of charity, sacrifice and faith. The Cross is joined with the Sword. With the reduction of war as the twelfth century advanced, leisure gave rise to war games like jousts and tournaments and the allied concept of courtly love. Although as a cultural ideal, courtly love had a refining and civilizing influence, it remained primarily a literary convention and hence will be dealt with later.

What was the actual state of affairs? From the earliest age of chivalry, chroniclers and observers have pointed out so many inconsistencies and corruptions that one is left to question the entire social code. Despite the values of moderation, magnanimity and protection of the weak, the chivalric ideal presupposed a society where serfs outnumbered freemen. The code did reach a high point in the first half of the thirteenth century. But even here the decay began soon enough, caused by the decline in crusading zeal and by the rising wealth of the merchant classes. Instead of fighting the infidel for the possession of the Holy Land, Christians either fought among themselves or led a life of pleasure. The rich citizens brought much material comfort but their wealth weakened the feudal aristocracy: they began to buy for themselves the ranks of knighthood. In fact, Edward I perhaps wanted to accelerate this process by compelling all freeholders possessing an estate of £20 a year to become knights. At the same time, honest commerce acquired a dignity in every field of life; although the knights were forbidden by civil law to become traders or merchants, they could hardly resist the forces of history. The Cistercians, possibly the richest religious body in England, derived their wealth mainly from success in the wool trade. Of course, in the Hundred Years' War, the knights made themselves suddenly rich by looting efficiently; certainly, the custom of ransoming prisoners brought a commercial element into knightly life. The real trouble between Shakespeare's Henry IV and Hotspur begins, we may briefly note, with the ransoming of prisoners.

Courtly love conventions are not a reliable guide to the actual conditions of love and marriage in Chaucer's time. Marriages were negotiated with great haste on purely commercial motives; this was also the reason for the many child-marriages. A woman could inherit property but in order to defend it she needed a husband. Divorce was easy, though only for rich people who were scheming for larger inheritance. The idealised woman of courtly love who was put on a pedestal to be worshipped by the knight contrasts violently with the widespread practice of beating wives, sisters and daughters.

Perhaps the idealisation was the natural outcome of the unbearable harshness of actuality. There being little privacy in the medieval castle, and women being debarred from the masculine recreations of physical exercise, drinking and war, they were confined to an intolerable boredom that often encouraged furtive debauchery. Since marriage was inimical to romantic love, illicit love was idealised in the courtly convention. The power of the code is evident in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. Although Criseyde can marry as a young widow, her love with Troilus begins and ends in secret. Even when Troilus comes to know that Criseyde is to be handed over to the Greek camp in exchange for the Trojan prince Antenor, he does not make public their love. That would have at once made them man and wife.

3.4   INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

The intellectual milieu of Chaucer was ultimately controlled by a religious vision common to medieval culture. It is of course to be found in the Retractation at the end of *The Canterbury Tales*, where the poet prays that his sin of writing secular and courtly literature may be forgiven. Similarly, *gentilesse* or nobility and courtly love acquire a deep spiritual content. This is hardly surprising since the Christian church played a central role in the life of the people, and the parish priest, even more than the passing friar, was the chief instructor. Its dedication to Christ's teachings led it or, at least, sections of the clergy to denounce the social evils of the day. The Lollards dominated the literature of satire and complaint. Followers of the heretical Wyclif, they were aided in their criticism by mystical writers like Dame Juliana of Norwich, Richard Rolle and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. These mystics undermined institutional religion by their emphasis on a personal relationship with God. The Lollards are also remembered for the first English translation of the Bible under the guidance of Wyclif.

The cosmos of the Middle Ages was providentially ordered and harmonious. The earth was the point-sized centre of a system of crystalline concentric spheres for the planets to go around. This Ptolemaic, geocentric model was displaced in the Renaissance by the Copernican heliocentric (sun at the centre) universe. But in the Middle Ages it was held together by Gods' love, which controlled all the cycles of seasons, tides, birth and death. According to medieval belief, the stars as agents of Destiny combined with Fortune as powerful influences on human life. Of course, God's providence worked in everything, although men could not grasp its ways.

Astrology and medicine were closely related in Chaucer's world. Each of the twelve signs of the zodiac was thought to control a different part of the human body; moreover, the physical characteristics and nature of each person were determined by his horoscope at birth. This gave rise to the four medieval 'humours.' Physicians treating a patient would first cast his horoscope; then combining this with the positions of the stars when the illness began and when the doctor paid his visit, they would attempt to heal.

Related to astrology was the pseudo-science of alchemy. Chaucer's yeoman in *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* knowledgeably refers to the four spirits and seven bodies.

The spirits are quicksilver, arsenic, crystalline salt and brimstone and the bodies are the medieval planets (including the sun and the moon). Thus gold belongs to the sun, silver to the moon. iron to Mars, quicksilver to Mercury, lead to Saturn, tin to Jupiter and copper to Venus. Chaucer's contemporary, John Gower, wrote nearly two hundred lines in the *Confessio Amantis* on alchemy.

Chaucer's doctor refers to many learned authorities on medicine. Among the classical sources are Hippocrates and Galen; among the Moslem physicians we find Avicenna and Averroes. Finally we have English physicians of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries: Gilbertus, Anglicus, Bernard, Gaddesden. The human body was believed to have four fluids or 'humours' of which one would always predominate. If blood was predominant, we would have a 'sanguine' person; if phlegm, a 'phlegmatic' person, if choler, a choleric person and if black bile, a 'melancholic' person. Chaucer's Reeve is choleric, Franklin melancholic. Humours determined temperament and physical make-up, and the latter was also shaped by the stars. According to Galen, the doctor had to consider the four elements of earth, water, air, fire and the four qualities of hot, cold, dry, moist in treating the body. Each of the twelve zodiac signs was related to the elements, qualities and humours. Not only are the human mind and body thus closely related but man himself is further related to the larger order in the universe.

Another medieval science in which Chaucer had an interest was the science of dreams. Here, his source, Macrobius' commentary on *The Dream of Scipio*. lists five types of dream: the Somnium, the visio, the oraculum, the insomnium, the phantasma or visium. The somnium is a dream requiring symbolic interpretation by an expert. The visio reveals a coming event exactly as it will be. In the oraculum a spirit or relative or an important person appears to the dreamer and announces what is to happen. By contrast to these prophetic dreams, the insomnium and the phantasma indicate nothing apart from the dreamer's physical state. The former may be produced by fear or worry or digestive disturbances; the latter is a kind of delusion.

3.5 LITERARY BACKGROUND

The Middle Ages are usually held to begin in Europe with the sack of Rome, but in England it begins conventionally with the Norman Conquest (1066-87) and ends with the Reformation (1533-59). In terms of the literary output, this time-span could be divided into three periods. In the first period, up to 1250, religious writings predominate, in the second (1250-1350), romances. In the third period we have Chaucer, Langland, Gower, the *Pearl* poet and so on.

In 1066 William, the Duke of Normandy, invaded England claiming the English throne as the next of kin to Edward the Confessor and defeated his rival, Harold, at the Battle of Hastings. In the next four years, the English nobility was virtually wiped out, and the new king's French supporters constituted the new aristocracy in England. Before the Norman Conquest. Latin was the language of divine worship and learning while English (that is, Old English) was widely used in other spheres. The Normans introduced the French language into England as the language of the ruling classes. But the English language continued to be spoken by the uncultivated masses. Thus the initial effect of the Conquest was no doubt damaging to the vernacular literature. But it never died out because while Anglo-Norman French increasingly became a special and fashionable accomplishment (as in the case of Chaucer's Prioress), the oral nature of English kept it alive among the largely illiterate people. Understood by all, it had a clear metrical shape and held the listener's attention by clever appeals to him and summarising the content from time to time. This non-private character of Middle English literature fitted neatly into or grew out of crowded communal life in households and religious communities. Above all, the language survived as the popular medium of preaching.

After England lost Normandy in 1204 and the nobility was no longer allowed. in 1244, to possess lands in both England and France, the tide turned in favour of English. After 1250, there is a substantial increase in the number of French words in English, indicating clearly that a people or class, used to French, was switching over to English. In fifty years, from 1250 to 1300, the language of the governing classes changes back to English. Thus ultimately the Norman influence was not wholly negative. The Normans imported the French literature and literary standards of the twelfth-century Renaissance: these provided the models for a new native literature of politeness and urbanity. English vocabulary was enriched with many French words which made the language more cosmopolitan and literary. Further, the old Teutonic alliterative measure was largely replaced by French syllabic verse, standard in Europe. Actually the Conquest resulted in a fusion of Teutonic (northern) and Romance (southern) traditions. Subsequently, literature in England was written in three languages: Latin, French and English. The imitation of French works like the *Songs of Roland* gradually produced an upper-class English literature. Even the British legend of King Arthur reached English romance not directly from Celtic traditions but through the French romances of Chrétien de Troyes and his successors.

All medieval literature offers a sharp contrast to modern literature in its impersonality, religious feeling and didactic content. Much of this literature is in fact anonymous, and the conditions of publishing and book reproduction (before the printing press) give it a communal character. The medieval author also did not place value on originality as we now understand it: an old and authoritative source only heightened the appeal of literature. As narrative poetry moved out of the mead-hall into the castle, the presence of women in the audience produced an important stylistic change: instead of the heroic (*Beowulf*), we have the courtly (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). Even where the writing was not religious, a deep moral concern located the secular in a sacred framework.

The fertility and variety of literature around Chaucer's time—romance, lyric, drama, mystical meditation—are evident also in the alliterative revival of the fourteenth century. This meant primarily the revival of the old four-beat alliterative measure of Old English poetry, of *Beowulf*, for instance. The twenty odd poems written in this older metre in Middle English mostly came from the north and the north-west of England, although *Piers Plowman* originated in the west Midlands. From the west also came four poems in the north-western dialect contained in a single manuscript. Originally untitled, they are now identified in the order in which they appear, as *Pearl, Purity, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The similarities among them suggest some common ground, perhaps even a common author. *Pearl* is the important religious poem in the collection, describing in elevated mystical language the vision of a father whose child has died. Even if the poem is not taken in autobiographical terms, the allegory of the pearl reveals an ethical concern for purity. The poem handles the theme of salvation in the framework of a personal elegy, using time-honoured medieval conventions of dream and debate. What strikes the modern reader is the deep personal feeling and sensuous description controlled with artistic restraint by considerable metrical skill. *Purity* shows similar ethical preoccupations with uncleanness and grace, and *Patience* tells the story of Jonah and the whale in realistic detail.

Sir Gawain is perhaps the most complex verse romance in Middle English literature. Courtly in tone, it is the finest Arthurian romance in English dealing without didactic considerations the theme of knightly courage and truth. It combines two stories found separately either in Celtic or Old French romances: a) Gawain's encounter with the Green Knight and the three blows exchanged with the latter, b) the three temptations held out by the host's wife at Bercilak's castle. The three blows match the three temptations, and the plot is well-knit. But the modern reader is moved by the colour, energy land vivid detail that make it a veritable tapestry. The freshness of observation is reflected in dialogue (between Gawain and the lady of the castle) and

above all we are given a sense of multiple actions moving simultaneously. The Gawain poet belongs to the north-west Midlands, probably south Lancashire as indicated by the landscape and local allusions. He has a good knowledge of moral and theological problems and his vocabulary contains a large French element.

The alliterative revival is marked by poems of social and moral protest: they respond actively to the unrest of the period. The anti-establishment satire is appropriately presented in alliterative verse and not in the conventional courtly measure. The outstanding poem in this respect is *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*. The multiple extant manuscripts show that it was a popular work, and the author's keen interest in the text is revealed in his three versions. The earliest version or A-text is short (2579 lines) and consists of a prologue and eleven passus (or cantos). The B-text is a revision with a prologue and twenty passus (7241 lines). The C-text revises further (7353 lines) and is divided into twenty-three passus. Beginning with a vision on the Malvern Hills in the west of England of a 'field full of folk,' it develops into a comprehensive portrait of fourteenth-century life. Although the multiple visions include familiar allegories like the Seven Deadly Sins, the poem's strength does not lie in the narrative. Lacking in orderliness and logical plan, digressive in impulse, the poem, especially in its A and B texts offers a powerful contrast to the ironic detachment of Chaucer. Its realistic and biting satire often reaches the visionary intensity of Dante. Its religious and political message is inseparable from its sanctification of honest labour.

Among the other contemporaries of Chaucer, Gower's earnestness is conventional and unrelieved by humour; he also lacks Langland's intensity. But in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Gower was considered equal to Chaucer. His *Speculum Meditantis* is in French, *Vox Clamantis*, which has a vivid account of the Peasant's Revolt, is in Latin, and *Confessio Amantis* is in English. In the last poem Gower goes beyond mere didactic content to write of love as an unrewarded servant of Venus. But even here the framework of the stories is the seven deadly sins since he confesses to a priest (Genius, the priest of Venus).

Chaucer had many imitators in his time or a little after. Among these, Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate, despite the latter's *Fall of Princes* (which anticipates the sixteenth-century *Mirror for Magistrates*) are not half as successful as the Scottish Chaucerians: the Scottish king, James I, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas. *The Kingis Quhair* of James celebrates love and its fulfilment through trials and adversities. Dunbar's *Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* was influenced by Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, while Douglas's *The Palice of Honour* shows a debt to Chaucer's *Hous of Fame*. Henryson came closest to Chaucer, first in his *Fables*, but he added a moral. Later he borrowed again from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in *The Testament of Cresseid*. His Cresseid, deserted by Diomede, curses the gods and is punished with leprosy. Deeply ashamed, she withdraws into confinement. Here one day Troilus gives her alms without recognising her. She recognises Troilus, however, and condemns her own infidelity. Henryson's vision is grim and sombre in comparison to Chaucer's forgiving humanity.

As a mature poet Chaucer was able to combine the courtly and bourgeois conventions of literature. The aristocratic, secularised literature, imported from twelfth-century France, is built around the themes of courtly love, courtesy and chivalry. Marvellous adventure becomes the hall-mark of romance, which is written in a new verse form, the octosyllabic couplet. The heroine is traditionally desirable and difficult, and the knight-errant moves through trial to the happiness of requited love. Apart from the refining and chastening test of love, the knight often has to fight dragons and demons. The elements of adventure is soon minimised or rather turned inward as in *Roman de la Rose* of Guillaume de Lorris: here the allegory takes over and captures the movements of the soul. The setting is often exotic and unworldly. Allegory makes the springtime garden in *Roman de la Rose*, a conventional setting for courtly love, an earthly paradise.

Allegory is of course a distinctive technique of medieval literature common to courtly romance, alliterative satire and the Miracles and Moralities. A human figure may stand for a vice (Gluttony, Lechery, Idleness and so on in the Seven Deadly Sins) or for an institution like the Church, a thing like a pearl can mean purity and so on. In Chaucer's *Nuns' Priest's Tale* or *Parliament of Fowls*, animals represent in secular allegories human beings or social classes. The allegorical habit began perhaps from interpreting the Bible for a wide variety of people: this produced the many levels of meaning. Gradually, the literal meaning became a kind of disguise which had to be removed in order to reveal the higher meaning.

In the idealised courtly romances, background, character, speech and action are all static and formal. The ideal courtly lady, for example, has blond hair, white smooth forehead, soft skin, arched eyebrows, grey eyes, a small, round, full mouth, dimpled chin and so on. These devices are an aid to idealisation, to the movement away from the specifically individual to the abstract idea. Love for a woman is exalted to divine love. No wonder that Dante had been able to combine courtly eroticism with religious ecstasy. What Dante's Beatrice achieves is paralleled in the Arthurian romance where the comparatively secular search for personal perfection becomes the quest for the Holy Grail.

Gradually the courtly style learnt to include within it its opposite, the realistic style: Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales* represent this amalgam. The realistic style can be related to the emergence of the new middle classes. Its commonest genre is the fabliau, the short, humorous verse tale often marked by coarseness; others include the mime, the beast epic, the fable and so on. The fabliau is characterised by a certain animal vitality and grotesque exaggeration: it is impolite, irreverent, often vulgar and obscene. The fabliau setting is economical and precise. Its world contains peasants and bourgeois, clerks, priests, nuns, jugglers, some knights and ladies. There are some stock formulae, as for example the triangle of the unimaginative, jealous husband, sensual wife and lecherous priest or clever clerk. There is a pattern even to their portraits, although the typical portrait is suddenly brought alive through individual detail of speech, dress and physiognomy, as in *The Canterbury Tales*.

3.6 THE ARTS

As in literature, so in architecture, England gradually tried to work out a native version of the complex and glorious French Gothic style. The Gothic was a characteristic mode of the Middle Ages bringing together the flippant and the serious, the grotesque and the sublime, copiousness and ascetic control. Such a heterogeneous and hospitable mode not only accommodated an attention to minute and elaborate detail but subordinated the abundance to the angular simplicity of the spire. One of the most important buildings of the thirteenth century–Henry III's Westminster Abbey–was directly inspired by French work. By the second half of the fourteenth century, however, the so-called 'perpendicular' style spread over England, because it was cheaper and less extravagant. The Hundred Years' War introduced French brickwork and a French type of castle built on a simple quadrangular plan.

While medieval houses were overcrowded and their furniture scanty, the hangings, covers and cushions provided all the splendour. Tapestry and embroidery were aided by the English cloth industry. Embroidery designs were closely linked to 'illuminated' books and manuscripts. 'Illumination' was the technique of decorating the letters of a text (often the initial letter) with gold, silver and bright colours. Common people who could not afford illuminated manuscripts had to be satisfied with wall-painting and sculpture inside churches. The taste for portraiture, as in the picture of Richard II, indicates a growing interest in the individual away from the

idealised types of religious painting in the thirteenth century. The vast improvement in craftsmanship resulted in a more refined, polite and decorative style but the older monumental and somewhat heroic stateliness was lost.

3.7   LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learnt about the age of Chaucer, a transitional one. Although the focus has been historical, ultimately you have learnt about the growth of towns, decline of chivalry, gender relations, people's beliefs, the condition of the poor and varying literary ideals. In other words, you have acquired some idea of the life and values of the people at that time

3.8   EXERCISES

1. Describe the effect on fourteenth-century life and literature of the following: I) the Hundred Years' War, ii) the Peasants' Revolt, iii) the Black Death. (You will find your answer mainly in 1.2. The war destroyed chivalry and depleted the government's resources. The Revolt and the condition of the poor. The rise of the English people and its effect on literature. The Black Death and the weakening of feudal tenure. Farm-hands in great demand. Many vacancies for the clergy who support the poor.)

2. Write short notes on:

    Courtly love, chivalry, women and marriage.   (See 1.3)

3. What is the relationship between astrology and medicine in Chaucer's time?   (See 1.4)

4. Write short notes on:

    The courtly romances, the Norman Conquest, allegory, the alliterative revival.(See 1.5)