**Лекция по дисциплине «Зарубежная литература» для студентов факультета иностранных языков (специальность «Английский язык»), 3 курс**

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**Lecture 2 The Middle English Literature**

The 14th century was a difficult time for England. The country was waging the Hundred Years' War with France. It was started in 1337 be the English king Edward 2 because the French lords wanted to seize Flanders (Belgium) which was England's wool market. As the king needed money for the war Parliament voted for the poll tax. This and the policy of the Catholic priests angered the peasants and a revolt, called the Peasants' Revolt, took place in 1381. About 60,000 people, led by Wat Tyler, marched to London destroying the feudal castles on the way. But in the capital Tyler was treacherously killed by the king's men and the Revolt was suppressed. Yet serfdom was abolished.

At the same time England suffered from three epidemics of the plague. This was a real tragedy for the country, because half of its population died from "black death".

Though the power of the feudal nobles and the Church was still very great, there were already signs of the birth of a new class. The townspeople, that is the craftsmen and the tradesmen, were becoming an important social force. These townspeople later formed the class of the bourgeoisie.

During this stormy century the English nation was being formed; English became the spoken language of the country; English literature was born.

The scholastic literature of the Church ranked high, but a new spirit was already noticeable in the cultural life of the country. The new spirit was marked by an optimism unknown to the Middle Ages. It was best reflected in the works by Geoffrey Chaucer, the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet who paved the way for English realistic literature, free of the influence of the Church.

The 15th century is known in English literature as the century of folklore. Many songs, called ballads, were composed then by the common people of the country. The ballads were songs in verses of four lines, called quatrains; the second and fourth lines of the verse rhymed. Among them there were historical and legendary ballads. Some were humorous and others were lyrical. A favourite legendary hero of the English people is Robin Hood. Many ballads have been composed about him and his friends.

Geoffrey Chaucer was the greatest writer of the 14th century. He was born in London in the family of a wine merchant. At 20 he tok part in the war with France, was taken prisoner by the French and ransomed by his friends. He held a number of positions at the English king's court and several times visited Italy and France on diplomatic missions.

In Italy he got acquainted with the works of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. What they wrote was full of new, optimistic ideas and love of life and had a great influence on his future works, the most important of which was the "Cantenbury Tales".

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th century (two of them in prose, the rest in verse). The tales, some of which are originals and others not, are contained inside a frame tale and told by a collection of pilgrims on a pilgrimage from Southwark to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral.[1] The Canterbury Tales are written in Middle English. Although the tales are considered to be his magnum opus, some believe the structure of the tales is indebted to the works of The Decameron which Chaucer is said to have read when he visited Italy in the 14th century.

The characters, introduced in the General Prologue of the book, tell tales of great cultural relevance. The first part of the prologue begins with "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote" indicating the start of spring and the end of a brutal winter. The themes of the tales vary, and include topics such as courtly love, treachery, and avarice. The genres also vary, and include romance, Breton lai, sermon, beast fable, and fabliaux. Though there is an overall frame, there is no single poetic structure to the work; Chaucer utilizes a variety of rhyme schemes and metrical patterns, and there are as well two prose tales.

Some of the tales are serious and others comical; however, all are highly accurate in describing the traits and faults of human nature. Religious malpractice is a major theme as well as focusing on the division of the three estates. Most of the tales are interlinked with similar themes running through them and some are told in retaliation for other tales in the form of an argument. The work is incomplete, as it was originally intended that each character would tell four tales, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the return journey. This would have meant a possible one hundred and twenty tales which would have dwarfed the twenty-four tales actually written.

People have sought political overtones within the tales, particularly as Chaucer himself was a significant courtier and political figure at the time, close to the corridors of power. There are many hints at contemporary events, although few are proven, and the theme of marriage common in the tales is presumed to refer to several different marriages, most often those of John of Gaunt. Aside from Chaucer himself, Harry Bailly of the Tabard Inn was a real person and it is believed to be quite likely that the cook is actually Roger Knight de Ware, a contemporary London cook.

The structure of The Canterbury Tales is a frame narrative and easy to find in other contemporary works, such as The Book of Good Love by Juan Ruiz and Boccaccio's Decameron, which may have been one of Chaucer's main sources of inspiration. Chaucer indeed adapted several of Boccaccio's stories to put in the mouths of his own pilgrims, but what sets Chaucer's work apart from his contemporaries' is his characters. Compared to Boccaccio's main characters - seven women and three men, all young, fresh and well-to-do, and given Classical names - the characters in Chaucer are of extremely varied stock, including representatives of most of the branches of the middle classes at that time. Not only are the participants very different, but they tell very different types of tales, with their personalities showing through both in their choices of tales and in the way they tell them.

Chaucer does not pay much attention to the progress of the trip. He hints that the tales take several days but he does not detail any overnight stays. Although the journey could be done in one day this speed would make telling tales difficult and three to four days was the usual duration for such pilgrimages. The 18th of April is mentioned in the tales and Walter William Skeat, a 19th century editor, determined 17 April 1387 as the probable first day of the tales.

Scholars divide the tales into ten fragments. The tales that make up a fragment are directly connected, usually with one character speaking to and handing over to another character, but there is no connection between most of the other fragments. This means that there are several possible permutations for the order of the fragments and consequently the tales themselves.