Fifty Major Novels in English Literature

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Dedication

Writing a work is never a one person phenomenon. It is produced only by the contribution and unending help from teachers, family, colleague, and friends.
It is almost impossible for me to enlist them but I can not finish writing this if I do not acknowledge special persons, whose help has been a permanent gift to my life.

My Parents, who are mainstay of my life.
My teachers, who taught me for what I know.
My Husband, for keeping my life in pleasant and peaceful state.
My Brothers, nephew, whose cheerfulness made me confident.
And Most specially My daughter "Vedica" for coming to my life as bundle of joy. I dedicate this book to her.

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Preface

Books can be instruments of enjoyment and inspiration if correctly introduced to young minds" - Designed with such thought, this book acts as a simple yet comprehensive book for students and learners of English literature.

Assorted fifty major novels of all time has been analysed. This is intended to be of immense help to aspirants of UGC-NET exam. Apart from covering syllabus of many UG, PG courses, this book can be served as handbook for learners of all level of english Literature.

Charting from Chaucer to Salman Rushdie and hinging upon all major ones in-between, this work, I hope, will serve the purpose of being of great help to budding english students.

Context, Plot, Characters, Adoption have been detailed in each chapter of the book. The paragraphs in each chapter is curated keeping in the mind that this will serve as a succinct and reliable source.

The Drama and Plays are also detailed for acts.

The history of literature is the historical development of writings in prose or poetry which attempt to provide entertainment, enlightenment, or instruction to the reader/hearer/observer, as well as the development of the literary techniques used in the communication of these pieces. Literature and writing, though obviously connected, are not synonymous. The very first writings from ancient Sumer by any reasonable definition do not constitute literature-the same is true of some of the early Egyptian hieroglyphics or the thousands of logs from ancient Chinese regimes. Scholars always have and always will disagree concerning when the earliest records-keeping in writing becomes more like "literature" than anything else: the definition is largely subjective.

English literature has sometimes been stigmatized as insular. It can be argued that no single English novel attains the universality of the Russian writer Leo

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Tolstoy's War and Peace or the French writer Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary. Yet in the Middle Ages the Old English literature of the subjugated Saxons was leavened by the Latin and Anglo-Norman writings, eminently foreign in origin, in which the churchmen and the Norman conquerors expressed themselves. From this combination emerged a flexible and subtle linguistic instrument exploited by Geoffrey Chaucer and brought to supreme application by William Shakespeare. During the Renaissance the renewed interest in Classical learning and values had an important effect on English literature, as on all the arts; and ideas of Augustan literary propriety in the 18th century and reverence in the 19th century for a less specific, though still selectively viewed, Classical antiquity continued to shape the literature. All three of these impulses derived from a foreign source, namely the Mediterranean basin. The Decadents of the late 19th century and the Modernists of the early 20th looked to continental European individuals and movements for inspiration. Nor was attraction toward European intellectualism dead in the late 20th century, for by the mid-1980s the approach known as structuralism, a phenomenon predominantly French and German in origin, infused the very study of English literature itself in a host of published critical studies and university departments. Additional influence was exercised by deconstructionist analysis, based largely on the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

The European Romantic movement reached America in the early 19th century. American Romanticism was just as multifaceted and individualistic as it was in Europe. Like the Europeans, the American Romantics demonstrated a high level of moral enthusiasm, commitment to individualism and the unfolding of the self, an emphasis on intuitive perception, and the assumption that the natural world was inherently good, while human society was filled with corruption. Romanticism became popular in American politics, philosophy and art. The movement appealed to the revolutionary spirit of America as well as to those longing to break free of the strict religious traditions of early settlement. The Romantics rejected rationalism and religious intellect. It appealed to those in opposition of Calvinism, which includes the belief that the destiny of each individual is preordained.

—Swati Kumari

Acknowledgement

For the greater benefits of students, this work has taken help from various reliable websites of english literature. Seed of this work is from my note book which has been prepared during my preparation of exam and since then, has been instrumental in my classroom teaching.

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Canterbury Tales (1387) by Chaucer

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THE CANTERBURY TALES

The Canterbury Tales (Middle English: *Tales of Caunterbury*) is a collection of 24 stories that runs to over 17,000 lines written in Middle English by Geoffrey Chaucer between 1387 and 1400. In 1386, Chaucer became Controller of Customs and Justice of Peace and, in 1389, Clerk of the King's work. It was during these years that Chaucer began working on his most famous text, *The Canterbury Tales*. The tales (mostly written in verse, although some are in prose) are presented as part of a story-telling contest by a group of pilgrims as they travel together from London to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The prize for this contest is a free meal at the Tabard Innat Southwark on their return.

After a long list of works written earlier in his career, including *Troilus and Criseyde*, *House of Fame*, and *Parliament of Fowls*, *The Canterbury Tales* is near-unanimously seen as Chaucer's *magnum opus*. He uses the tales and descriptions of its characters to paint an ironic and critical portrait of English society at the time, and particularly of the Church. Chaucer's use of such a wide range of classes and types of people was without precedent in English. Although the characters are fictional, they still offer a variety of insights into customs and practices of the time. Often, such insight leads to a variety of discussions and disagreements among people in the 14th century. For example, although various social classes are represented in these stories and all of the pilgrims are on a spiritual quest, it is apparent that they are more concerned with worldly things than spiritual.

Structurally, the collection resembles Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, which Chaucer may have read during his first diplomatic mission to Italy in 1372.

It has been suggested that the greatest contribution of *The Canterbury Tales* to English literature was the popularisation of the English vernacular in mainstream literature, as opposed to French, Italian or Latin. English had, however, been used as a literary language centuries before Chaucer's time, and several of Chaucer's contemporaries—John Gower, William Langland, the Pearl Poet, and Julian of Norwich—also wrote major literary works in English. It is unclear to what extent Chaucer was seminal in this evolution of literary preference.

While Chaucer clearly states the addressees of many of his poems, the intended audience of *The Canterbury Tales* is more difficult to determine. Chaucer was a courtier, leading some to believe that he was mainly a court poet who wrote exclusively for nobility.

The Canterbury Tales is generally thought to have been incomplete at the end of Chaucer's life. In the General Prologue, some 30 pilgrims are introduced. According to the Prologue, Chaucer's intention was to write four stories from the perspective of each pilgrim, two each on the way to and from their ultimate destination, St. Thomas Becket's shrine (making for a total of about 120 stories). Although perhaps incomplete, *The Canterbury Tales* is revered as one of the most important works in English literature. It is also open to a wide range of interpretations.

CONTEXT

The Canterbury Tales is the most famous and critically acclaimed work of Geoffrey Chaucer, a late-fourteenth-century English poet. Little is known about Chaucer's personal life, and even less about his education, but a number of existing records document his professional life. Chaucer was born in London in the early 1340s, the only son in his family. Chaucer's father, originally a property-owning wine merchant, became tremendously wealthy when he inherited the property of relatives who had died in the Black Death of 1349. He was therefore able to send the young Geoffrey off as a page to the Countess of Ulster, which meant that Geoffrey was not required to follow in his ancestors' footsteps and become a merchant. Eventually, Chaucer began to serve the countess's husband, Prince Lionel, son to King Edward III. For most of his life, Chaucer served in the Hundred Years War between England and France, both as a soldier and, since he was fluent in French and Italian and conversant in Latin and other tongues, as a diplomat. His diplomatic travels brought him twice to Italy, where he might have met Boccaccio, whose writing influenced Chaucer's work, and Petrarch.

In or around 1378, Chaucer began to develop his vision of an English poetry that would be linguistically accessible to all—obedient neither to the court, whose official language was French, nor to the Church, whose official language was Latin. Instead, Chaucer wrote in the vernacular, the English that was spoken in

and around London in his day. Undoubtedly, he was influenced by the writings of the Florentines Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who wrote in the Italian vernacular. Even in England, the practice was becoming increasingly common among poets, although many were still writing in French and Latin.

That the nobles and kings Chaucer served (Richard II until 1399, then Henry IV) were impressed with Chaucer's skills as a negotiator is obvious from the many rewards he received for his service. Money, provisions, higher appointments, and property eventually allowed him to retire on a royal pension. In 1374, the king appointed Chaucer Controller of the Customs of Hides, Skins and Wools in the port of London, which meant that he was a government official who worked with cloth importers. His experience overseeing imported cloths might be why he frequently describes in exquisite detail the garments and fabric that attire his characters. Chaucer held the position at the customhouse for twelve years, after which he left London for Kent, the county in which Canterbury is located. He served as a justice of the peace for Kent, living in debt, and was then appointed Clerk of the Works at various holdings of the king, including Westminster and the Tower of London. After he retired in the early 1390s, he seems to have been working primarily on *The Canterbury Tales,* which he began around 1387. By the time of his retirement, Chaucer had already written a substantial amount of narrative poetry, including the celebrated romance *Troilus and Criseyde.*

Chaucer's personal life is less documented than his professional life. In the late 1360s, he married Philippa Roet, who served Edward III's queen. They had at least two sons together. Philippa was the sister to the mistress of John of Gaunt, the duke of Lancaster. For John of Gaunt, Chaucer wrote one of his first poems, *The Book of the Duchess,* which was a lament for the premature death of John's young wife, Blanche. Whether or not Chaucer had an extramarital affair is a matter of some contention among historians. In a legal document that dates from 1380, a woman named Cecily Chaumpaigne released Chaucer from the accusation of seizing her (raptus), though whether the expression denotes that he raped her, committed adultery with her, or abducted her son is unclear. Chaucer's wife Philippa apparently died in 1387.

Chaucer lived through a time of incredible tension in the English social sphere. The Black Death, which ravaged England during Chaucer's childhood and remained widespread afterward, wiped out an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the population. Consequently, the labor force gained increased leverage and was able to bargain for better wages, which led to resentment from the nobles and propertied classes. These classes received another blow in 1381, when the peasantry, helped by the artisan class, revolted against them. The merchants were also wielding increasing power over the legal establishment, as the Hundred Years War created profit for England and, consequently, appetite for luxury was growing. The merchants capitalized on the demand for luxury goods, and when Chaucer was growing up,

London was pretty much run by a merchant oligarchy, which attempted to control both the aristocracy and the lesser artisan classes. Chaucer's political sentiments are unclear, for although *The Canterbury Tales* documents the various social tensions in the manner of the popular genre of estates satire, the narrator refrains from making overt political statements, and what he does say is in no way thought to represent Chaucer's own sentiments.

Chaucer's original plan for *The Canterbury Tales* was for each character to tell four tales, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. But, instead of 120 tales, the text ends after twenty-four tales, and the party is still on its way to Canterbury. Chaucer either planned to revise the structure to cap the work at twenty-four tales, or else left it incomplete when he died on October 25, 1400.

Other writers and printers soon recognized *The Canterbury Tales* as a masterful and highly original work. Though Chaucer had been influenced by the great French and Italian writers of his age, works like Boccaccio's *Decameron* were not accessible to most English readers, so the format of *The Canterbury Tales,* and the intense realism of its characters, were virtually unknown to readers in the fourteenth century before Chaucer.

William Caxton, England's first printer, published *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1470s, and it continued to enjoy a rich printing history that never truly faded. By the English Renaissance, poetry critic George Puttenham had identified Chaucer as the father of the English literary canon. Chaucer's project to create a literature and poetic language for all classes of society succeeded, and today Chaucer still stands as one of the great shapers of literary narrative and character.

Language in The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury Tales is written in Middle English, which bears a close visual resemblance to the English written and spoken today. In contrast, Old English (the language of Beowulf, for example) can be read only in modern translation or by students of Old English. Students often read *The Canterbury Tales* in its original language, not only because of the similarity between Chaucer's Middle English and our own, but because the beauty and humor of the poetry—all of its internal and external rhymes, and the sounds it produces—would be lost in translation.

The best way for a beginner to approach Middle English is to read it out loud. When the words are pronounced, it is often much easier to recognize what they mean in modern English. Most Middle English editions of the poem include a short pronunciation guide, which can help the reader to understand the language better. For particularly difficult words or phrases, most editions also include notes in the margin giving the modern versions of the words, along with a full glossary in the back. Several online Chaucer glossaries exist, as well as a number of printed lexicons of Middle English.

The Order of The Canterbury Tales

Nobody knows exactly in what order Chaucer intended to present the tales, or even if he had a specific order in mind for all of them. Eighty-two early manuscripts of the tales survive, and many of them vary considerably in the order in which they present the tales. However, certain sets of tales do seem to belong together in a particular order. For instance, the General Prologue is obviously the beginning, then the narrator explicitly says that the Knight tells the first tale, and that the Miller interrupts and tells the second tale.

The introductions, prologues, and epilogues to various tales sometimes include the pilgrims' comments on the tale just finished, and an indication of who tells the next tale. These sections between the tales are called *links,* and they are the best evidence for grouping the tales together into ten fragments.

But *The Canterbury Tales* does not include a complete set of links, so the order of the ten fragments is open to question. *The Riverside Chaucer* bases the order of the ten fragments on the order presented in the Ellesmere manuscript, one of the best surviving manuscripts of the tale. Some scholars disagree with the groupings and order of tales followed in *The Riverside Chaucer,* choosing instead to base the order on a combination of the links and the geographical landmarks that the pilgrims pass on the way to Canterbury.

SUMMARY

The Canterbury Tales begins with the introduction of each of the pilgrims making their journey to Canterbury to the shrine of Thomas a Becket. These pilgrims include a Knight, his son the Squire, the Knight's Yeoman, a Prioress, a Second Nun, a Monk, a Friar, a Merchant, a Clerk, a Man of Law, a Franklin, a Weaver, a Dyer, a Carpenter, a Tapestry-Maker, a Haberdasher, a Cook, a Shipman, a Physician, a Parson, a Miller, a Manciple, a Reeve, a Summoner, a Pardoner, the Wife of Bath, and Chaucer himself. Congregating at the Tabard Inn, the pilgrims decide to tell stories to pass their time on the way to Canterbury. The Host of the Tabard Inn sets the rules for the tales. Each of the pilgrims will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury, and two stories on the return trip. The Host will decide whose tale is best for meaningfulness and for fun. They decide to draw lots to see who will tell the first tale, and the Knight receives the honor.

The Knight's Tale is a tale about two knights, Arciteand Palamon, who are captured in battle and imprisoned in Athens under the order of King Theseus. While imprisoned in a tower, both see Emelye, the sister of Queen Hippolyta, and fall instantly in love with her. Both knights eventually leave prison separately: a friend of Arcite begs Theseus to release him, while Palamon later escapes. Arcite returns to the Athenian court disguised as a servant, and when Palamon escapes he suddenly finds Arcite. They fight over Emelye, but their fight is stopped when

Theseus finds them. Theseus sets the rules for a duel between the two knights for Emelye's affection, and each raise an army for a battle a year from that date. Before the battle, Arcite prays to Mars for victory in battle, Emelye prays to Diana that she may marry happily, and Palamon prays to Venus to have Emelye as his wife. All three gods hear their prayers and argue over whose should get precedence, but Saturn decides to mediate. During their battle, Arcite indeed is victorious, but as soon as he is crowned victor, he is killed. Before he dies, he reconciles with Palamon and tells him that he deserves to marry Emelye. Palamon and Emelye marry.

When the Knight finishes his tale, everybody is pleased with its honorable qualities, but the drunken Miller insists that he shall tell the next tale. The Miller's Tale, in many ways a version of the Knight's, is a comic table in which Nicholas, a student who lives with John the carpenter and his much younger wife, Alison, falls in love with Alison. Another man, the courtly romantic Absolon, also falls in love with Alison. Nicholas contrives to sleep with Alison by telling John that a flood equal to Noah's flood will come soon, and the only way that he, Nicholas and Alison will survive is by staying in separate kneading tubs placed on the roof of houses, out of sight of all. While John remained in this kneading tub, Nicholas and Alison leave to have sex, but are interrupted by Absolon, singing to Alison at her bedroom window. She told him to close his eyes and he would receive a kiss. He did so, and she pulled down her pants so that he could kiss her arse. The humiliated Absolon got a hot iron from a blacksmith and returned to Alison. This time, Nicholas tried the same trick, and Absolon branded his backside. Nicholas shouted for water, awakening John, who was asleep on the roof. Thinking the flood had come, he cut the rope and came crashing through the floor of his house, landing in the cellar.

The pilgrims laughed heartily at this tale, but Oswald the Reeve takes offense, thinking that the Miller meant to disparage carpenters. In response, The Reeve's Tale tells the story of a dishonest Miller, Symkyn, who repeatedly cheated his clients, which included a Cambridge college. Two Cambridge students, Aleyn and John, went to the miller to buy meal and corn, but while they were occupied Symkyn let their horses run free and stole their corn. They were forced to stay with Symkyn for the night. That night, Aleyn seduced the miller's daughter, Molly, while John seduced the miller's wife. Thanks to a huge confusion of whose bed is who in the dark, Aleyn tells Symkyn of his exploits, thinking he is John: and the two fight. The miller's wife, awaking and thinking the devil had visited her, hit Symkyn over the head with a staff, knocking him unconscious, and the two students escaped with the corn that Symkyn had stolen.

The Cook's Tale was intended to follow the Reeve's Tale, but this tale only exists as a fragment. Following this tale is the Man of Law's Tale, which tells the story of Constance, the daughter of a Roman emperor who becomes engaged

to the Sultan of Syria on the condition that he converts to Christianity. Angered by his order to convert his country from Islam, the mother of the Sultan assassinates her son and Constance barely escapes. She is sent on a ship that lands in Britain, where she is taken in by the warden of a nearby castle and his wife, Dame Hermengild. Both of them soon convert to Christianity upon meeting her. A young knight fell in love with Constance, but when she refused him, he murdered Dame Hermengild and attempted to frame Constance. However, when King Alla made the knight swear on the Bible that Constance murdered Hermengild, his eyes burst. Constance marries King Alla and they have a son, Mauritius, who is born when Alla is at war in Scotland. Lady Donegild contrives to have Constance banished by intercepting the letters between Alla and Constance and replacing them with false ones. Constance is thus sent away again, and on her voyage her ship comes across a Roman ship. A senator returns her to Rome, where nobody realizes that she is the daughter of the emperor. Eventually, King Alla makes a pilgrimage to Rome, where he meets Constance once more, and the Roman emperor realizes that Mauritius is his grandson and names him heir to the throne.

The Wife of Bath begins her tale with a long dissertation on marriage in which she recounts each of her five husbands. Her first three husbands were old men whom she would hector into providing for her, using guilt and refusal of sexual favors. However, the final two husbands were younger men, more difficult to handle. The final husband, Jankin, was a twenty-year-old, half the Wife of Bath's age. He was more trouble, as he refused to let the Wife of Bath dominate him and often read literature that proposed that women be submissive. When she tore a page out of one of his books, Jankin struck her, causing her to be deaf in one ear. However, he felt so guilty at his actions that from that point in the marriage, he was totally submissive to her and the two remained happy. The Wife of Bath's Tale is itself a story of marriage dynamic. It tells the tale of a knight who, as punishment for raping a young woman, is sentenced to death. However, he is spared by the queen, who will grant him freedom if he can answer the question "what do women want?" The knight cannot find a satisfactory answer until he meets an old crone, who promises to tell him the answer if he marries her. He agrees, and receives his freedom when he tells the queen that women want sovereignty over their husbands. However, the knight is dissatisfied that he must marry the old, low-born hag. She therefore tells him that he can have her as a wife either old and ugly yet submissive, or young and beautiful yet dominant. He chooses to have her as a young woman, and although she had authority in marriage the two were completely happy from that point.

The Friar asks to tell the next tale, and asks for pardon from the Summoner, for he will tell a tale that exposes the fraud of that profession. The Friar's Tale tells about a wicked summoner who, while delivering summons for the church court, comes across a traveling yeoman who eventually reveals himself to be the

devil himself. The two share trade secrets, and the devil tells him that they will meet again in hell if the summoner continues to pursue his trade. The summoner visits an old woman and issues her a summons, then offers to accept a bribe as a payment to prevent her excommunication. The old woman believes that she is without sin and curses the summoner. The devil then appears and casts the summoner into hell.

The Summoner was enraged by the Friar's Tale. Before he begins his tale, he tells a short anecdote: a friar visited hell and was surprised to see that there were no other friars. The angel who was with him then lifted up Satan's tail and thousands of friars swarmed out from his arse. The Summoner's Tale is an equally vitriolic attack on friars. It tells of a friar who stays with an innkeeper and his wife and bothers them about not contributing enough to the church and not attending recently. When the innkeeper tells him that he was not recently in church because he has been ill and his infant daughter recently died, the friar attempted to placate him and then asked for donations once more. Thomas the innkeeper promised to give the friar a "gift" and gives him a loud fart.

The Clerk, an Oxford student who has remained quiet throughout the journey, tells the next tale on the orders of the Host. The Clerk's Tale recounts a story about Walter, an Italian marquis who finally decides to take a wife after the people of his province object to his longtime status as a bachelor. Walter marries Griselde, a low-born but amazingly virtuous woman whom everybody loves. However, Walter decides to test her devotion. When their first child, a daughter, is born, Walter tells her that his people are unhappy and wish for the child's death. He takes away the child, presumably to be murdered, but instead sends it to his sister to be raised. He does the same with their next child, a son. Finally, Walter tells Griselde that the pope demands that he divorce her. He sends her away from his home. Each of these tragedies Griselde accepts with great patience. Walter soon decides to make amends, and sends for his two children. He tells Griselde that he will marry again, and introduces her to the presumed bride, whom he then reveals is their daughter. The family is reunited once more. The Clerk ends with the advice that women should strive to be as steadfast as Griselde, even if facing such adversity is unlikely and perhaps impossible.

The Merchant praises Griselde for her steadfast character, but claims that his wife is far different from the virtuous woman of the Clerk's story. He instead tells a tale of an unfaithful wife. The Merchant's Tale tells a story of January, an elderly blind knight who decides to marry a young woman, despite the objections of his brother, Placebo. January marries the young and beautiful May, who soon becomes dissatisfied with his sexual attentions to her and decides to have an affair with his squire, Damian, who has secretly wooed her by signs and tokens. When January and May are in their garden, May sneaks away to have sex with Damian. The gods Pluto and Proserpina come upon Damian and May and Pluto restores