

Black Death, which had swept over England when Chaucer was only nine year old, made matters worse. It destroyed the population of England. Discontent among the people was widespread. While the people were starving and wallowing in utter poverty and misery, the king and his courtiers were leading a life of luxury and extravagance. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 burst like a volcano and shook the very foundations of English Society.

Corruption in the Church: Lollard's Movement

Corruption was widespread in the Church as well. As Hudson writes: "The greater prelates heaped up wealth, and lived in a Godless and worldly way; the rank and file of the clergy were ignorant and careless; the mendicant friars were notorious for their greed and profligacy." John Wycliffe, "the morning star of the Reformation", and poets like Langland and Gower freely condemned the growing corruption in the Church, and through their teachings sought to revive the real Christianity. Thus the ideas of the Reformation were already becoming a force in the age of Chaucer.

Rise of the Modern Spirit

Chaucer's age was an age of transition in which medieval habits of mind were giving place to the modern spirit. The democratic spirit was growing. The Peasants' Revolt did much to deteriorate the feudal system and give self-confidence to the people. This led to the disintegration of the feudal system. The authority of the king and the barons was undermined while that of the Parliament grew apace. A new and prosperous merchant class was coming into prominence and power was passing into its hands from the hands of the feudal lords. Corruption did much to weaken the hold of the church. Its authority was further weakened by the anti-papal agitation.

Humanism and the Literature of the Age

The spirit of new learning accelerated the transition from the medieval to the modern. This was the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, which was to reach its full blossoming in England only during the Age of Queen Elizabeth. Chaucer played a most important role in the importing of this spirit from Italy to England. There was vast intellectual awakening and an unprecedented spurt of literary activity. It was the heyday of English poetry. English became a national language from a dialect. The age also witnessed the foundation of an English prose style. Humanism was one of the potent formative influences of the age of Chaucer.

The Rise of New Chivalry

The transitional nature of the age is reflected in the changed mind-set towards chivalry. The knights of the middle ages went to distant lands in search of adventure and fought and laid down their lives for some noble cause. The Knight of Chaucer represents this old age of chivalry, while the Squire, his son, is a representative of the new chivalry, which was rising at the time. He is given to enjoyment of life. He wears a fine dress, can sing and play on the flute, and he goes to the battle not for the sake of religion, but in the hope of winning the favour of his lady.

Major English Writers of the Period

Geoffrey Chaucer:- (1340s - 1400)