CHAUCER’S ART OF CHARACTERIZATION

Characterization is the process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character. The writer has two options by which he reveals the personality of his character. First one is “Direct Characterization” which tells the audience what the personality of a character is and the second one is “Indirect Characterization” that shows things that reveal the personality of a character. Indirect characterization can be done through speech, thoughts, actions, effects of characters on others, and looks.

Characterization bears the same relation to plot as architecture to the bricks and mortar and though a story which in inferior hands would be crude and improbable, becomes real and life-like. We have studied the greatest writers like Pope, Shakespeare, Milton and Fielding who were perfect in painting their characters. Chaucer is also one of them. He has won world-wide acclaim only because of his art of characterization. Let’s discuss major qualities of Chaucer’s art of characterization.

First major quality of Chaucer’s art of characterization is “Realism.” He is the first great observer and the first great painter of the characters in the English literature. In fact, next to Shakespeare, he is the greatest in this field. He always describes his character as if his eyes had been focusing and noticing every minute detail of his character but he does all this in a casual and haphazard manner. That’s why, some critics find in his casualness “an art which conceals art.” The portrayal of his characters is a real picture gallery in which twenty nine portraits are hanging on the wall showing all their details and specifications. No doubt, “Chaucer has The seeing eye, the rentive memory, the judgment to select and the ability to expound.” He very realistically portrays “The Friar.” He advises the sinners not to offer prayers or weep to purgatte of their sins. Rather he calls for high amount of money from the sinners to absolve of their sins.

“Ful swetely herde he confessioun,
And plesaunt was his absolucioun;
He was an easy man to yeve penance,
Ther as he wiste to have a good pituance.”

We can say, “Not a single character has escaped Chaucer.”
Second quality of Chaucer’s art of characterization is “Humour” which makes his characterization prominent and distinguished. “Chaucer is a born humorist.” In “The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales”, first he talks of the bravery, skill, experience and grandeur of the Knight but later on he tells that the Knight is very gentle in his behaviour and harmless to anybody. “And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.” He describes physical appearance of the Reeve humorously in the following words.

“Ful longe were his legges and ful lene,
Y-lyk a staf, there was no calfy-sene.”

Third quality of Chaucer’s art of characterization is his use of irony and satire. No doubt, most of the humour is based on comic touches but there are some characters that have touches of irony and satire but he never tries to be sharp and bitter in his attitude. Almost all the ecclesiastical characters except the Parson are presented in a mocking style. Her dress, fashionable manners, pretentions and vanities have been conveyed ironically.

“And sikerly she was of great desport,
And ful plesaunt and amyable of port
And peyned hire to counterfete cheere
Of court, and to been estatlich of manere.”

Similarly, the Doctor loves gold especially, “For gold in medicine is a cordial.” The Shipman has been called a good fellow but actually he is a rascal. Thus, we can say that Chaucer uses irony and humour as tools to disclose the absurdities, and the hypocrisy of the characters.

Fourth quality of Chaucer’s art of characterization is his minute study of human psychology and his mastery over it. His characters have relation with all the ages and climes. Even in this age, we meet these characters with few changes. These changes are in the names and titles but his characters are same with same feelings forever and ever. A critic remarks: “Chaucer is a modern among the medieval and medieval among the moderns.”
Fifth quality of Chaucer’s art of characterization is the **distinctness** which he gives to all of his characters. No character has resemblance with any other character depicted in the book. All the characters are different from the other characters. For example, the Miller, the Reeve and the Cook exhibit coarseness, yet they are different from each other in their vulgarity. Even the corrupt members of the church including the Summoner, the Pardoner, the Friar and the Monk are different from one another in their corruption and in this way they maintain their individuality.

Sixth major quality of Chaucer’s art of characterization is the **depiction of balanced characters**. You can never observe exaggeration in the presentation of these characters. Chaucer’s Knight is a worthy man but not free of shortcomings. One of the major flaws in his personality is that he neglects his own son who, unlike his father is the representative of the degenerated and deteriorated ideals of chivalry.

Seventh major quality of Chaucer’s art of characterization is that he is **away from superficiality**. He does not depict his characters with supernatural or superhuman qualities. That’s why, even his ideals characters are not far from reality. The Knight and the Parson closely resemble the characters of the real world. Dryden also says: “**Chaucer’s characters are still remaining in mankind, and even in England, though they are called by other names.**”

To sum up, we can say without any hesitation and fear of contradiction that like Pope, Shakespeare and Milton, Chaucer is the master in the portrayal of his characters and above all he is a realist and delineates his characters as he sees them. We fully agree with the remarks of a critic who observes: “**Never before in English Literature had there been anything like this company of real, unidealised, contemporary men and women, and there was to be nothing comparable again until Shakespeare began to write two hundred years later.**”

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