

CHAPTER 4

MIDDLE ENGLISH

The year AD 1066 is generally taken to be the end of the Old English period but Middle English came into existence after a gap of almost a century, for the reasons stated earlier. Thus Middle English period is accepted to be from AD 1150-1500. At each end there is a period of transition when the language seems to be in a state of flux. Two significant events distinguish Middle and Modern English. These are (a) the introduction of printing technology, and (b) the 'Great Vowel Shift'.

Today, it is impossible to think and imagine a world without the printing machine. The printing press set up by William Caxton at the Westminster Abbey, England in AD 1476 has played a historic role in the development of English, because it helped to standardize the language. While Middle English was dialectical, Modern English is a standard language, though it also has regional and international varieties.

The other major linguistic change known as The Great Vowel Shift involved a series of changes in the pronunciation of the English long vowels. The changes began in about AD 1400 and were fully established by the end of the Middle period. These phonological changes are seen as the last barrier between the English of the early times and that of now.

DIALECTS OF MIDDLE ENGLISH

One of the most striking features of Middle English was the fact that dialects of Middle English existed in both spoken and written form. There was no single literary standard and the language varied from county to county. Further, OE had four dialects but Middle English had one more. They were known as Northern, Southern, East Midland, West Midland, and Kentish. Only the last remains unchanged. The Northumbrian of OE is now called Northern, West-Saxon is now Southern and Mercian is divided into two dialects which came to be known as East Midland and West Midland dialect. Modern English has evolved from the East Midland dialect.

A number of factors together with geographical considerations led to a situation where the East Midland dialect became the most important and useful to the people of this age.

MIDDLE ENGLISH VOCABULARY

The most important linguistic impact of French rule in England was that a large number of French words entered the language. Many of these words are related to the dignity and honour of the royal office. Some of these words are royalty, realm homage, prince, princess, duke, duchess, palace, castle, hall and sovereign. The French influence was gradual but significant during the 13th and 14th centuries. According to one estimate about 10,000 new words were brought over from the French into English during this time- Out of these almost 75% are in use today. These words are related to law, literature administration, religion, fashion.

Another dominant influence on Middle English was that of Latin. Some of the words from Latin came directly, but some entered through French and were words related to science, medicine, law and literature. Some of the borrowed words are:

History, index, intellect, legal, magnify, picture, genius, summary, substitute, temperature, magnify, private etc.

MIDDLE ENGLISH GRAMMAR

The Middle English period witnessed extensive and fundamental changes in the phonological and grammatical system in English. The changes in the grammatical system reduced English from a highly inflected language to an analytic one. Due to certain phonetic changes in the language, the word endings that served as markers of number, gender, case and tense were so altered in their pronunciation as to lose their distinctive form, and therefore their usefulness. All but a few OE noun, verb and adjective endings died and grammatical relations began to be indicated by fixed patterns of word order. Thus, the gradual loss of inflections and the fixing of word order were the most important changes during this period.

Another major phenomenon to have occurred during this time is known as the Great Vowel Shift. When we compare the Middle and Modern consonant systems, we find very little difference between them. But the vowel systems are very different. This is because between Middle English and our times the long vowels have changed considerably, but the short vowels have remained almost the same. The series of changes affecting the long vowels of Middle English is known as the Great Vowel Shift.

MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

Middle English Literature reflects quite accurately the changing fortunes of English. The early literature of this phase (AD 1150-AD 1215) is exclusively religious in nature. During

this period the upper classes mainly patronized French literature and English writers could not expect support or patronage from them. It was the Church and their leaders who were keen to spread the religion and so promoted native literature.

The second phase of this period (AD-1250-AD 1350) displays a tendency to variety and dialectical sub- division. In addition to the religious writings there are also some secular works. Many of these were translations of popular French romances. *LAY OF HAVELOK THE DANE*, written in Midland dialect is a good example. This poem shows clearly that the old inflections are all gone, and the vocabulary is almost unmixed with French. Two other works of this period which contain a high proportion of French words are *The Romaunt of the Rose* written by Geoffrey Chaucer and the *Romance of King Alexander*. The second half of the 14th century (AD 1340-1400) is known as the period of great individual writers. This phase is also referred to as the Classical Middle English. The notable writers of this period are Chaucer, John Gower, William Langland, and John Wyclif. The following are the well known works of these writers who have made this an outstanding age.

WELL KNOWN WORKS OF THESE WRITERS

CHAUCER –The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales; The Canterbury Tales

GOWER - Meditantis; Vox Clamantis; Confessio Amantis

LANGLAND- Piers the Plowman

WYCLIF -Bible (Translation)

Two other great works of this period are by unknown authors but this in no way diminishes their importance. These are *the Pearl*, and *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight*. The latter is considered one of the greatest examples of English poetry. The universally accepted pinnacles of poetic achievements are the works of Chaucer which provide a great amount of information about medieval life and times. Thus, Chaucer's works are the major sources of information about Middle English grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

Exercises

1. Write T for true and F for false statements:

- a) The year 1066 AD marks the end of the Old English and the beginning of the Middle English.
- b) Modern English has evolved from the West Midland dialect.
- c) The early literature of Middle English is chiefly secular in nature.
- d) The second half of the fourteenth century is known as the period of great individual writers.

2. Answer these questions very briefly:

1. What is meant by the Great Vowel Shift?
2. When did it take place?
3. Name the dialects of the Middle English.
4. How many words (approx) were brought over from the French during the 13th and the 14th century? What percentage of these words is in use today?
5. What made English from a highly inflectional language into an analytic one?
6. Name four notable writers of the Middle English.
7. Whose works are the major sources of information about Middle English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation?

