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## ***Deep and Surface Meaning in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" : A New Historicist Approach***

**Asst. Lect. Mahmood Rakan Ahmed\***

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The first reading of Chaucer's the "Knight's Tale" gives the readers the impression that the poem is about romance deals with courtly love: extremely polite love and full of respect, and portrays the conflict between the two knights Palamon and Arcite to gain Emely. But this is not the only meaning of the poem. There is another different meaning for the poem when it is put in its historical context. This paper argues that the deep meaning of the poem is Chaucer's critique for the noble class and the sheer need to change the social order system in England in the fourteenth century. The paper examines also the representation of women in the poem, and proves that women are portrayed as passive and marginalized in the poem.

The present paper adopts a new historicism theory which relates literary texts to other texts of its historical era. New historicism is a literary and critical approach which accentuates the cultural context in which the text is written, rather than focusing specifically on the formal structure of the text itself. Added to that, it states that literary works are not independent entities, but instead, a product of diverse web of socio-material practices. In other words, literary works should be explicated, not for their global motifs or historical content, but for tenors as objects rooted in a particular socio-historical environment (Bressler 191). In this context Michael Foucault clarifies that, "All knowledge is rooted in a life, a society, and a language

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that have a history; and it is in that very history that knowledge finds the element enabling it to communicate with other forms of life" (Foucault 372). Therefore, to apprehend a literary text, researchers need to first understand the author's background and the cultural context in which the work was composed (Bressler 193).

There are certain historical incidents or sub-texts which help and support the reader to grasp the deep meaning of the poem. They are: the social order in the fourteenth century in England, the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, the Black Death, the Hundred Years war between England and France, and Chaucer's gradual promotion in the court and government circles. The common aim of all these important incidents denotes the definite need to change inside the society and the political system. Therefore, the surface meaning of the poem deals with courtly love, while the deep meaning is about Chaucer's absolute need to change the system, organize a new social order and fruitful and conscious society. Chaucer critiques the noble class's extravagant life and their indifference to the other classes of society which they think are there to serve them.

It is important to give a brief account of the story of the poem. Theseus, king of Athens, married Hyppolyta, an Amazon lady he had defeated in a battle. The king of neighboring Thebas (Creon) was a tyrant who irreverently prevented the funeral of enemy dead. Theseus attacked Thebas and conquered the tyrant. After the battle, he sentenced two prisoners of war, Arcite and Palamon to life in prison for no obvious reason. In prison, Arcite and Palamon both fell in love with Emily, Hyppolyta's sister-they never met her, but simply looked at her from their prison cell. Arcite was eventually

released and returned in disguise to court Emily. Then Palamon escaped from the prison. The two men met by chance in the woods. They were fighting fiercely when Thesues found them. He decided to let them fight it out for Emily's hand in public spectacle. To prepare the fight, Thesues built an amphitheater with shrines to Mars, Venus and Diana. Arcite prayed to Mars, asking to win the battle. Palamon prayed to Venus, asking to marry Emily. Emily prayed to Diana, asking not to be forced to marry either man. Arcite won the battle, but then his horse threw him and his chest was crushed and died. Then Thesues ordered Emily to marry Palamon.

In the fourteenth century, the society was divided into three classes, the three C's; the Court, Church and Country. The higher class consists of the nobles and knights, who fight, control and rule the country. This aristocratic class is responsible for setting the social order and applying the laws. The second class is the religious men; they are to pray and feed people's spirits. The third class is the common people, the workers who work and serve the noble class. In this sense Olson clarifies that, "The Anselmian version of the notion that knights are to fight, clerics are to pray, and laborers are to work" (Olson 23). The noble class was perceived as a keeper of stability in the society. This idea was pervasive and it was generally known even between the Clerics and as Halverson puts it, "John of Salisbury, Ramon Lull, Bishop Durand, Langland, and Georges Chastellain formulated the matter similarly and testify to the continuity of the ideal from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. These (largely clerical) formulations regarded the knight-lee class as a protective and disciplinary civil force, devoted to piety and to the maintenance of order in the temporal world" (Halverson 12-13).

Theseus, the duke of Athens, appears as a safeguard of order when he is asked by two mournful women to save them from the brutality of the king of Thebes who refused to bury their husbands, and this deed of course at that time was a sign of disorder, disrespect and savagery, "And yet now the old Creon..woe oh woe...But makes hounds eat them as an insult"(Chaucer 938-947). Immediately, Theseus proves his nobility and chivalry and replies to their request. He prepares himself and his army to go to Thebes and help people there. By fulfilling his promise and saving those poor people in Thebes, he remains loyal to his class's duty which is to keep people in safety and protect the order and system. This duty is essential for the noble class, "With Creon, who was king of Thebes...The bones of their husbands who were slain"(Chaucer 986-992).

Interestingly enough, Palamon and Arcite also represent the noble class since they are knights. They are valorous as shown in their fight in the grove and the tournament but both also show lack of wisdom and piety of the knights when they after Arcite's release. Each of them laments his own fate and envies the other, each displays ignorance and lack of faith in the divine order, "Arcite: "Alas, why do folk so commonly complain...I am as good as dead; there is not any remedy"(Chaucer 1251-1274).

Palamon: Then said he, "O cruel gods that govern

This world with binding of your  
eternal word

(Chaucer 1034-1035).

King Theseus who is perceived in the poem as responsible for order and keeper of stability turns the situation from bad



to worse, a miserable and tragic end. He changes the fight between the two cousins into a battle between hundreds of knights from each side:

Each one of you shall bring a hundred knights

Armed up for the lists in all aspects

All ready to decide the right to her by battle (Chaucer 1351-1353).

Theseus orders a special amphitheatre to be built with special paintings and adornment for this trivial occasion, in order to decide who deserves Emely. Elbow clarifies that in part III the scope of dilemma is vastly enlarged by physical, social and theological dimensions. Physically it is no longer a fight between two men in a virgin grove but a tournament of two hundred knights in a large and elaborate architectural structure before an audience of thousands. All society now takes part : the competitors constitute a polarization of fighting men the world over; the best workers, crafts men, and artists of the kingdom have made the lists; and the tournament is a major public ritual in which the interest and sympathy of even the “commune” is enlisted. The theological expansion is even greater: what was originally a dispute by two men is now a dispute not only between gods but also between the planets and their influences. (Elbow 97-98). The characteristics and the descriptions of the amphitheater are very long and detailed. This grandeur building comes as an important link in the poem suggesting a more significant function as well as a clear example of the exaggerated ornamentation and life of the noble class. It is to be built on the same position where Palamon and Arcite found fighting each other in the grove. All the art and technology available to the king were brought to bear on the construction of the amphitheater. The shape is like a circle, an

excellent form for such fighting. Besides, there is a statue for Venus, Mars and Diana. In all this, Theseus is the guiding spirit. This is an example of the noble class's state when they have something important like the issue of Palamon and Arcite. This reveals Theseus's lack of sagacity, maturity and wisdom; he adds insult to injury by setting that bloody battle for a trivial reason.

The battle between Palamon and Arcite goes in parallel with the Hundred Years war; it is useless and futile. France and England engage in this war and leave the Ottomans to enlarge their empire and control over the Mediterranean and reach the Balkans. Both nations lead reflexive crusades, both are Christians and fight each other and forget completely the true crusade for the holy land. In this respect, Olson points out that, "While the two nations mounted their pseudo-crusade against each other, the Turkish army pounded up the Balkan" (Olson 5). Palamon and Arcite's fight is similar to this useless and absurd war; instead of fighting to regain Thebes from Theseus, the two cousins fight each other for sake of love, for personal profit and selfish needs. And Chaucer in this context shows their story in a ridiculous way, embroidered with elevated language and exaggerated details in order to upbraid the noble class for their triviality and insufficiency to manage serious matters: this is their life and system. In this context Bergan states that , "We don't even know what Palamon and Arcite look like. Their reactions are simultaneous and parallel. Palamon sees Emelye and falls in love; Arcite sees Emelye and falls in love. Palamon says he loves her first; Arcite counters that he loved her first, "for paramour". It takes Palamon no time at all to go from "Cosynmyn" to "false Arcite" and Arcite responds with equal factitiousness. They are like children fighting over a toy". (Bergan 6).

In fact, the noble class engages in trivial matters and neglects the most important issues in their society like the people's economic state and their sufferings and needs. In this context it is important to explain that the Black Death was spread in England in 1348 and lasted for a very long time. It killed between third and more than half of the nation's inhabitants. Thus, one of the direct consequences of this disease was a shortage of farm labors and corresponding rise in wages in a rural and agrarian economic society in England. The land owners saw the rise in wages level as a sign of upheaval and insubordination and reacted with coercion. In 1349 king Edward III passed the Ordinance of Labors, fixing wages at pre-plague levels. The Ordinance was reinforced by Parliament's passing of the Statute of Laborers in 1351. The labor Laws were enforced with merciless insistence over the following decades. Therefore the peasants rebelled against the government because since the Black Death, poor people had become progressively more mad and agitated that they were still subordinate. The peasants were calling for less harsh laws and a fair distribution of wealth. In this sense Olson argues that, "The leaders of the 1381 Peasant's Revolt envisage a one-lord ideas to provide for radical and large reform" (Olson 25). Although the revolt was defeated, it was a popular uprising as well as a political rebellion. So, the peasant revolt against the miserable circumstances they passed through and the complete absence of rational government which neglected this crucial social class. Therefore, Chaucer's depiction of the deadly battle between Arcite and Palamon is a parody to the incongruous life of noble class. It reflects also their irresponsibility and engagement in frivolous matters.

The need for change can be observed in the characterization in the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's characters in this work derive from different classes. He represents a group of pilgrims

of different classes, nobles, religious and commons gathered in one group and travel together. It is a bold and dare step. This idea is not usual, common or followed at that time as Baugh clarifies that, "It was an admirable method for bringing together people of various types and different social classes" (Baugh 258). It is necessary to know that the upper class was the only one who was interested in reading books as Chaucer's. So, Chaucer is aware of this class and its taste for reading, embellishing and enjoying their mood with different themes which suit their life. But, putting mixed classes together and producing this image for the upper class is a subtle idea and new poetic technique. In this respect Brewer states that, "Chaucer's actual audience, as appears from the remark here, from similar deductions to be made elsewhere in the tales, and from his to the addresses audience in other poems, clearly consists of lords, ladies, knights, well-to-do gentry folk like "Moral Gower" and upper class scholars and lawyers like the "philosophical Strode" (Brewer 295).

As for the representation of women in this poem, they appear in a negative image. At the beginning of the poem, the readers see the appearance of two women from Thebes who were crying and mourning from the bad treatment they received from the king, Creon. Their black clothes and lamentation are considered their only weapons through which they can get what they need; Theseus's help to bury their husband's corpses. Lamentation is the only solution for them to be introduced to the society, although they were princesses, "And why you are clothed thus in black...Now help us, lord, since it is in thy power" ( Chaucer 911-930). So, this image gives the reader the impression that women can be known and heard through lamentation, shouting and mourning. They are a bad omen which is connected with death, misery and grief.

On the other hand, Emely is a beautiful woman from Thebes. She lives under the care and protection of Theseus. She is the subject of a struggle between Palamon and Arcite. Both fall in love with her from first sight when she was walking in the garden of the court. She doesn't know anything about them and their struggle to gain her; she hasn't seen them before. She appears as a property that both knights want to gain without even asking which one she likes or wants. Although she belongs to the upper class, she doesn't have the right to choose her partner according to her own will. She received a good and kind treatment from Theseus. But, he considers her as a POW. Added to that she is a subject for Theseus. In fact, most critics like Susan Crane, Jean E. Jost, Charles Muscatine, Lois Roney and Sarah Stanbury claim that the "Knight's Tale" is about courtly love. This interpretation is defeated at the end of the poem where the reader sees at the end of the poem that the lover who suffers more loses; the lover loses the tournament wins Emely. Emely's desire is never taken into consideration. And at the end of this dramatic struggle Emely's marriage privileges a political profit for Theseus:

At Athens, upon certain points in case;

Among the which points spoken of there was

To have certain bonds of alliance

That should hold Thebes from all defiances

Whereat this noble Theseus, anon

Invited there the gentle Palamon (Chaucer 1933-1939).

Theseus exploits Emely's presence in his court and achieves his plan to gain peace and stability in Thebes by marrying her to Palamon. She is a princess in his court, but at the same time she is a POW, a subject, of Theseus, and as Knapp states that, "A positive reading takes Emely as a young member in Theseus's family whose interests require his wise attention; a negative one takes her as his prisoner of war to be disposed of his political advantage" (Knapp 23). Women appear as property to be used in the patriarchal society for male's interests physically and materially. Thus, Chaucer divulges this bad and negative perspective of women in his society at that time where women considered as marginalized and submissive. This inferior representation of women in Chaucer's poem is a gusty poetic technique to give a voice to the subaltern. In this respect Charles E. Bressler clarifies that, "New historicism allows us to hear many of the silenced voices of the past, speaking once again loud and clear" (Bressler 196). Thus, Chaucer's negative representation of women in his poem can be interpreted as an essay to give a voice to the voiceless. He uncovers the suffering of women under the hegemony of men.

Chaucer's status as an observer and his gradual promotion in the court and government's circles have played a role in his literary production. In 1367 Chaucer appears as a valet in the king's household, and the next year as an esquire. He is also sent abroad frequently on the king's business, "sometimes on secret negotiation" once as a member of the group which tried in 1381 to arrange a marriage between Richard II and the daughter of the king of France. In 1372 he received the first of several appointments in the civil service. He was made Controller of Customs and Subsidy on Wool, Skins and Hides in the port of London, with usual provision

that he should keep the records with his own hand (Baugh 250). In 1382, he received the additional appointment of Controller of the Petty Customs with permission to exercise the office by deputy. These positions he resigned or lost in 1386. At this time he gave up his apartment over Aldgate and perhaps was already living in Kent, for he was appointed a justice of the peace there in 1385 and next year represented Kent in parliament (251).

In fact, Brewer mentions that Chaucer's position and state in the court is seen as something new. In other words, Chaucer was the "*new man*", the literate layman who was not the clerk, the courtier who was not a knight; he was not poor, but not rich a salaried man, not landed gentry, he was not even a merchant like his father and grandfather. The literate layman, as it was thought long ago of Chaucer, was a very important person to emerge in the latter part of the fourteenth century (Brewer 304). So, this special and new status as well as his gradual movement in the court and government's circles enables him to critique the social order and the noble class in his time. This also gives him the chance to establish the new class in society, "The Middle Class" which is considered later and especially in the nineteenth century the backbone of society. in this sense Brewer points out that:

It is a commonplace observation today that social fluidity creates personal insecurity and ambiguity. It is also a commonplace that social fluidity creates greater awareness of what social structures there are. Such might well have been

the case with Chaucer. In any event, he shows a rich awareness in his historical

context of class distinctions, class feelings, and social matters generally

The reader of Chaucer in this sense might ask how Chaucer, the courtier, can critique the court (in this context the noble class) in the "Knight's Tale". Olson has clarified this issue when he said that Chaucer appears as a rhetorician, a philosopher and a student of ethics. The function of a rhetorician is to persuade people to a new position, and this is one of what this paper tries to prove and claimed about Chaucer's idea to establish a new social order. The role of a philosopher is to reveal the design of eternal sapience in specific historical moment, and in this context he satirizes both the king of France and England of 1380's were both countries led by child kings: France by Charles VI who later became mad and occasionally howled like a wolf or imagined himself made of glass; England, by Richard II who was later as unpredictable as Shakespeare made him, suspected by and suspicious of his magnates and given to absolutist notions of royal power. Weak kings and war problems led both nations in the constitutional crises, the worst of which led to Richard II's deposition in 1399 (Olson 5-6). The parallel image in the "Knight's Tale" is what Theseus did with Palamon and Arcite and his tragic miserable administration of their problem. And of student of ethics Olson says is to show the ideal. Chaucer critiques the noble class from within in order to promote and develop his society. He wishes to see his society in a better status. Chaucer realizes that it is his duty to criticize the negative aspects in his society. The "Knight's Tale" is narrated by a knight and deals with the noble class affairs and parodies their luxurious, ruinous and joyful life. The major themes of this class show that their ignorance and indifference to other classes and especially the commons who were suffering from the bad conditions surrounded them. So, the circumstances



around Chaucer, environment and his personality affect his literary productions, and as Baugh puts it:

When we look at Chaucer's poetry as a whole and try to comprehend its

Character in its larger aspects, we must recognize that this character was due

partly to his environment, partly to himself –the mysterious combination of

hereditary qualities that made him the kind person he was.  
Environment

made him a court poet. He wrote for the circle in which he lived; therefore we see him as a graceful occasional poet and a teller of tales (Baugh 262).

The sub-texts enlisted earlier in the paper help the readers to interpret the poem and determine Chaucer's deep meaning behind the "Knight's Tale" which is to reform the social order and to critique the noble class. All these important historical incidents share a common goal which is the necessity to change the *status quo* in their society at that time. So that, Chaucer makes use of this tumultuous state in his society and reveals in the "Knight's Tale" the sheer need to change in his society. He directs his poetry to better his society. Chaucer's creativity, subtlety and awareness make him deserve the title as the father of the English Literature.

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المعنى السطحي والعميق في قصيدة "حكاية الفارس" ل جفري  
تشوسر:

مقاربة تاريخية جديدة

م.م. محمود راكان احمد  
المستخلص

يحاول هذا البحث أن يثبت أن المعنى العميق لقصيدة جفري تشوسر  
"حكاية الفارس" يمثل نقدا لطبقة النبلاء ويصور الحاجة الماسة لإحداث التغيير في  
النظام الاجتماعي في انكلترا أبان القرن الرابع عشر. ويتطرق البحث أيضا إلى  
تمثيل المرأة في القصيدة، مؤكدا أن النساء قدمهن على أنهن سلبيات و مهشمات  
في القصيدة قيد الدراسة.