

CHAPTER I

Old English Literature (500-1100)

Old English Poetry	<i>Beowulf-typical old English verse; Caedmon - a 7th-century poet; Cynewulf-a 9th-century poet</i>
Old English Prose	<i>King Alfred's works; Later annals and religious writings; Aelfric and Wulfstan</i>
Old English Drama	

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The time period of about 500-1100 AD in British history was characterized by foreign invasions and internal struggles. This resulted in the mixing of several races, tongues and cultures.

After the Romans departed from the British Isles in 407 AD fighting continued between the Picts and the Scots who had lost their common enemy. The fifth century also saw conquests and the gradual occupation by Germanic tribes - Angles, Jutes and Saxons - who had moved north to Scandinavia and from there to Britain. Apart from making conquests, these tribes preferred agricultural life, had strong family and tribal ties, and were very loyal to their king or chief. The legendary King Arthur defeated the Saxons in 490 AD and for about a decade halted their advance.

At the end of the sixth century, the Anglo-Saxons accepted Christianity after Pope Gregory sent Saint Augustine to Britain in 597 AD. (The Romans had introduced Christianity to the Celts centuries earlier.) This gave rise to some religious writings.

At the end of the eighth century the Vikings (also known as Norsemen or Danes) invaded the country, easily overcame the local inhabitants, and plundered their estates. It was not until the reign of King Alfred the Great (871-900) that their advance was stopped. With their acceptance of Christianity, the Danes partially blended in with the local people.

Alfred's successors, Edgar and Ethelred II were in 1016 followed by Danish King Canute (reigned 1016-1035), after whose death the empire fell apart Alfred's great-grandson, Edward, son of the French Emma of Normandy, took over the throne. The fact that Edward had no descendants led to a power struggle between his brother-in-law, Harold, and Emma's nephew, William of Normandy. William's victory over Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 led to the Norman conquest and occupation of England, which then opened a new chapter in British history.

The language of this whole period (500-1100) is known as Old English. No exact date exists for its beginning. The first written records of the language date from around 690 AD (however, people had spoken it long before then). Most Old English words were Germanic, having come from the languages of the Angles, Jutes and Saxons.

Latin, however, also had a strong influence on early English. Later, the Scandinavians (Vikings) contributed many words to Old English. By the end of the Old English period (marked by the Norman conquest), Old English had been established as a literary language with a remarkable polish and versatility.

Old English literature consists of poetry, prose, charms, riddles, maxims, proverbs, and various other wisdom sayings. It is a mixture of pagan traditions, thoughts about life, the universe and nature, as well as Christian thought and moral values. There is often no clear-cut delineation between religious and non-religious poetry or sometimes even between poetry and prose.

OLD ENGLISH POETRY

Old English poetry included long epic heroic poems, which drew on the Bible as well as on pagan sources for their content. Some poetry was also based on historical events. With a history of invasions and occupations, many writings of this era are chronicles, annals, and historical records. Some are in the forms of poetry and describe various battles, for example, "The Battle of Maldon" and "The Battle of Brunanburh". The themes are war, conquest and bravery. Many eighth-century works depict Anglo-Saxon resistance against the Vikings.

Lament and melancholy are frequently present in describing man's struggles against his environment, life's difficulties, and the passage of time. Life is fleeting. Often a prologue and epilogue express hope in God's compassion and mercy. Examples of such poems include "The Wanderer", "The Seafarer" and "The Ruin". Other poems depict the separation of a man and a woman and the accompanying sadness, such as in "The Wife's Lament" and "The Husband's Message". In these types of poem the man may have been exiled and sometimes there is hope, sometimes not. Collectively, Old English poems that lament the loss of worldly goods, glory, or human companionship are called elegies.

Beowulf is the best-known and best-preserved Old English verse. Caedmon and Cynewulf were well-known Old English religious poets in the 7th and 9th century respectively. Much Old English poetry is difficult to date and even harder to assign to specific authors.

Beowulf - Typical Old English Verse

Beowulf is an epic poem of over 3,000 verses, whose manuscript dates from about the 10th-century. The poem is the only epic from the time that has been preserved as a whole. Its author is unknown, but he seems to have had a good grasp of the Bible and other great epics, such as Homer's *Odyssey*.

The work glorifies a hero and the values of bravery and generosity. The story is set in Scandinavia around 500-600 AD - a time of battles and conquests by Germanic Anglo-Saxon tribes in Denmark and southern Sweden. Its sources are old legends of these tribes who had moved north from Germany over Scandinavia and into Britain. It also reflects the acceptance of Christianity by

these new British settlers at the end of the sixth century.

The first part of the story takes place in Denmark. King Hrothgar is being pestered by a water monster, Grendel, who is killing his men. Beowulf comes to his aid and kills Grendel and later, at the bottom of the lake, also Grendel's mother, who comes to avenge her son. The second part happens in southern Sweden about fifty years later. Beowulf himself is a king and has to fight a firebreathing dragon.

As with other Old English literature, this epic incorporates both pagan and Christian ideas. The monster-slaying hero has his origin in two ancient fairy tales. From the pagan traditions also come a love of war and the virtue of courage. The biblical Old Testament supplies the idea about giants and monsters having descended from Cain's line. The poem is sometimes seen as a conflict between good and evil. From the Christian tradition, it incorporates morality, obedience to God, and avoidance of pride.

There are many contrasts, for example, water and fire, youth and old age, life and death, rise and fall of nations and individuals, friendship and desertion, faithfulness and betrayal, heroism and cowardice, hope and resignation, good and evil, as well as the past, present and future.

Elegy is apparent throughout - life is passing and is full of struggles and suffering, (This theme has an application also for modern life and the struggles of mankind.) This is contrasted by the courage of the main hero, said to be the "kindest and noblest of earthly kings and the most desirous of praise and glory". The poem begins and ends with the funeral of a king.

The work, written in characteristic Old English verse style, has artistic maturity and unity. It uses alliteration (words beginning with the same sound), kennings (metaphorical descriptive phrases or compound words), and internal rhyme (a word within a line rhyming with a word at the end of the line). Each line has two beats or stressed syllables. The style of poetical descriptions and word pictures with much repetition makes the action move slowly.

The poem is an important source of historical information which was later confirmed by archaeology. The tone and descriptions capture the rough, cold and gloomy North Sea atmosphere, as well as life's struggles of the people of that time who had to deal with many trials and obstacles. The poem was originally recited by a court singer and poet called "scop", who accompanied it with music and made occasional changes according to the inspiration of the moment.

Caedmon - a 7th-Century Poet

Caedmon was one of the religious writers of the time. His works were based mainly on the Old Testament. Some historians have attributed to Caedmon writing a 3,000-verse poem about the creation of the world (*Genesis*), which basically follows the Bible text with some departures. He may have also written two other works, *Exodus* and *Daniel*, though some feel that all three works have anonymous authorship. *Exodus* deals with the Israelite escape from Egypt and the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. *Daniel* includes the fall of Jerusalem, the two dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel's interpretation of them, and the miraculous survival of Daniel's three friends in the fiery furnace. A short hymn in praise of the creation, "Hymn of Creation", is also attributed to Caedmon.

Cynewulf- a 9th-Century Poet

A later poet, Cynewulf, and his followers, drew on the New Testament, as well as historical events connected with Christianity. His works include *The Fates of the Apostles*, a short martyrology, *The Ascension* (or *Christ II*), a homily (lecture on moral conduct) and biblical narrative, and *Juliana*, the story of a saint. The most famous is *Elene* (Helene), which describes Constantine's victory under the sign of the cross, his conversion, and his mother's legendary miraculous discovery of the original cross in Jerusalem. At this time, the "Holy Cross" cult was spreading across Europe and the cross was becoming sacred. Over the centuries, it would be used as a symbol giving blessing to the expression of man's basest instincts.

Cynewulf's work is clear and technically elegant. His theme is the continuing evangelical mission of the church from the time of Christ to that of Constantine. Cynewulf's followers later produced literature mixing Oriental, pagan, and Christian thought with images from nature and the animal world. For example, "The Panther" symbolized Christ, "The Whale" the Devil.

OLD ENGLISH PROSE

Prose developed later than poetry - in the ninth century - but sometimes it also partly contained the characteristics of poetry. It was influenced by Latin, the language of the church and the educated. It consisted of factual, historical, and religious writings.

King Alfred's Works

King Alfred the Great (reigned 871-900), one of the most significant rulers of the first millennium, after making peace with the Vikings, made his kingdom into a cultural centre. He translated many works from Latin, especially in the areas of religion, history and philosophy. This was the foundation of the written national language. The first translated works included *The Pastor's Book*, containing ideals for a pastor, with which Alfred as a secular ruler identified. He also translated *Baede's Church History* and other historical accounts. In addition, Alfred compiled medical information, annals, chronicles, and information for law books. His works lacked originality, and were more instructive and educational than artistic and beautiful.

Later Annals and Religious Writings

The first half of the tenth century saw Alfred's successors expand politically and militarily, but not culturally due to exhaustion from frequent battles with the Vikings. Only the annals continued and some poetry about victories over the Vikings. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is the best-known work of historical records spanning even beyond the Norman conquest. It contains both prose and poetry.

In the second half of the tenth century came cultural enlivenment through the

Benedictian reform, a monastic reform which resulted in a religious revival. The main literary styles included homilies, sermons, stories of saints' lives, and Bible translations. The chief authors were Aelfric and Wulfstan.

Aelfric and Wulfstan

Aelfric, abbot of Eynsham, wrote three cycles of forty homilies each (two volumes of *Catholic Homilies* and *Lives of the Saints*), as well as other homilies, pastoral letters, and several translations. His writings were clear to understand and beautiful in style. His alliterative prose, which loosely imitated the rhythms of Old English poetry, influenced writers long after the Norman conquest.

Wulfstan, the archbishop of York, wrote civil and church-related legal codes as well as homilies. He denounced the morals of his time and exhorted people to repentance. The belief was that the Viking occupation and the resulting oppression and suffering were the result of sin, and that the end of the world was at hand.

OLD ENGLISH DRAMA

The origin of drama goes back to brief scenes that monks acted out in churches to illustrate Bible stories. These later developed into full-length plays.

Sources of drama were primarily Catholic traditions and ceremonies that were gradually becoming more worldly. The Catholic church throughout Europe controlled almost the entire ideological sphere, including literary art. Drama was developing in churches where the whole society from the king to the lowest citizen gathered. It therefore had to cater to the broadest audience; hence its tendency toward secularity and language understood by the masses.

Two strong undercurrents influenced early drama: Folk plays based on ancient nature cults and pagan traditions; and classic Greek and Latin drama which were preserved, at least in rudimentary form, throughout the Dark Ages.

Catholic services were often in the form of drama- with colourful robes, recitation, singing and acting. Easter and Christmas ceremonies developed into major dramas in the ninth and tenth centuries. Herod's murderous acts often became a focal point of Christmas plays with horror and violence.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1.What was the time period of 500-1100 AD in British history characterized by?
- 2.What three influences shaped the Old English language?
- 3.What does Old English literature consist of?
- 4.How did the invasions and occupations of Britain influence Old English literature?
- 5.What are elegies and what mood and circumstances are frequently

present in them?

6. Describe the epic poem, *Beowulf*, mentioning the setting of the story, pagan and Christian influences, contrasting themes, and the literary style,

7. What contributions to Old English poetry were made by Caedmon (a 7th-century poet) and Cynewulf (a 9th-century poet)?

8. Describe the important contribution to Old English prose made by King Alfred.

9. What Old English prose styles came as a result of the Benedictian reform and who were the chief writers at the time?

10. What were the origin and the sources of Old English drama?

11. What two strong undercurrents influenced Old English drama?