

LECTURE 1. Different periods in the English literature of Middle Ages. The dawn of the English literature. Beowulf. Anglo-Saxon literature (7-11th centuries).

Plan

The main periods of English literature. Historical background: Celtic England, invasion (Angles, Saxons and Jutes). Oral origins of literature. The singers: scopers, gleemen. Heroic poetry – *Beowulf*. (Alliteration, parallelism, pagan- mythological base, metaphors). Elegies: *Wife's Laments*, *The Wanderer*, *The Husband's message*. Exeter Book; *Deor's Lament*(8c.) Christian literature: Caedmon (*Exodus*, *Genesis*, *Daniel*), Cynewulf (*Juliana*, *The fates of the Apostles*, *Christ*, *Elene*), Bede (*Ecclesiastical History of English people*) Alfred the Great instituted the *Anglo – Saxon Chronicle*, Aelfric – *Homilies*.

Periods of English Literature. For convenience of discussion, historians divide the continuity of English literature into segments of time that are called "periods." The exact number, dates, and names of these periods vary but the following table conforms to widespread practice

450-1066 Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) Period,
1066-1500 Middle English Period
1500-1660 The Renaissance (or Early Modern)
1558-1603 Elizabethan Age
1603-1625 Jacobean Age
1625-1649 Caroline Age
1649-1660 Commonwealth Period (or Puritan Interregnum)
1660-1785 The Neoclassical Period
1660-1700 The Restoration
1700-1745 The Augustan Age (or Age of Pope)
1745-1785 The Age of Sensibility (or Age of Johnson)
1785-1830 The Romantic Period
1832-1901 The Victorian Period
1848-1860 The Pre-Raphaelites
1880-1901 Aestheticism and Decadence
1901-1914 The Edwardian Period
1910-1936 The Georgian Period
1914- The Modern Period
1945- Postmodernism

The **Old English Period, or Anglo-Saxon Period**, extended from the invasion of Celtic England by Germanic tribes (the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) in the first half of the 5thc.(450)to the conquest of England in 1066 by the Norman French under the

leadership of William the Conqueror. In the 6th c. -7th.c Anglo-Saxons had been converted to Christianity, before this time their lit. was oral, but from establishment of Christianity Anglo-Saxon began to develop a written literature. A high level of culture and learning was soon achieved in various monasteries; the 8th.c. churchman and scholar Bede wrote in Latin, the standard language of international scholarship. The poetry written in the vernacular Anglo-Saxon, known as Old English, included *Beowulf* (8C), the greatest of Germanic epic poems, and such lyric laments as “The Wanderer”, “The Seafarer” and “Deor”, of which, though composed by Christian writers, reflected the conditions of life in the pagan past. Caedmon and Cynewulf were poets who wrote on biblical and religious themes, and there survive a number of Old English lives of saints, sermons, and paraphrases of books of the Bible. Alfred the great, a West Saxon King (871-99) who for a time united all the kingdoms of Southern England against a new wave of Germanic invaders, the Vikings, was no less important as a patron of literature than as a warrior. He himself translated into Old English various books of Latin prose, supervised translations by other hands, and instituted the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a continuous record, year by year, of important events in England.

There were two cultures through the Anglo-Saxon period: the Christian culture, which had arrived in England in 597 with Saint Augustine and the heroic culture, of leaders and heroes who defended their lands against invaders. Their passions to war and wandering, their love of glory were the main motives which gave the impulse to create the first epic poem named *Beowulf* belonging to 7th.c. /Epic – is the story in poetry of the adventures of a brave man./ *Beowulf* is a story of about 3 000 lines and consists of two separate adventures. The name of its author is unknown. *Beowulf* is not about England, but about King of the Danes – Hrothgar and about a brave young man, Beowulf, from southern Sweden, who goes to help him. There is a small content of a poem, which was written in Anglo-Saxon, known also as Old English. In our days it cannot be read except by those who have made a special study of Old English. Hrothgar is in trouble. His great hall, called Heorot, is visited at night by a terrible creature, Grendel, which lives in a lake and comes to kill and eat Hrothgar’s men. One night Beowulf waits secretly for this thing, attacks it and in a fierce fight pulls its arm off. It manages to reach the lake again, but dies there. Then its mother comes to the hall in search of revenge, and the attacks begin again. Beowulf follows her to the bottom of the lake and kills her there. In later days, that was a second part of poem. Beowulf, now king of his people, has to defend his country against a fire-breathing dragon. He kills the animal but is badly wounded in the fight, and dies. The poem ends with a sorrowful description of Beowulf’s funeral fire. Here are a few lines of it put into modern letters: The sorrowing soldiers then laid the glorious prince, their dear lord, in the middle. Then on the hill the war-men began to light the greatest of funeral fires. The wood-smoke rose black above the flames, the noisy fire, mixed with sorrowful cries.

Thus the epic poem *Beowulf* tells u about a folk hero who killed a monster and a fire-splitting dragon.

The poem itself has a solid background of detailed realism. We see vividly an interesting picture of life in those old days. It tells us of fierce fights and brave deeds, of the speeches of the leader and the sufferings of his men. It describes their life in the hall, the terrible creatures that they had to fight, and their ships and travels. They had a hard life on land and sea. The few lines of *Beowulf* do not explain much about the verse, and it may be well to say something about it. Each half-line is joined to the other by alliteration – when two or more words beginning with the same sound.

[b] **B**ore it **b**itterly he who **b**ided in darkness

[t] **T**welve-winters' time torture suffered

[s] **S**oul-crushing sorrow. Not seldom in private

[k] **S**at the **K**ing in his **c**ouncil; **c**onference held they

[h] **H**ead in his **h**ome: of **h**eroes then living

Things are described indirectly and in combinations of words. Many nouns and names of people are accompanied by one or even two descriptive words. Based on a certain likeness between two subjects or two ideas, the descriptive words show the subject in a new light. Such descriptive words are called metaphors or kennings. A ship is not only a ship: it is a sea-goer, a sea-boat, a sea-wood, or a wave-floater. A sailor is a sea-traveler, a seaman, a sea-soldier. Even the sea itself (sae) may be called the waves, or the sea-streams, or the ocean-way. Therefore, if the poet wants to say that the ship sailed away, he may say that the ship, the sea-goer, the wave-floater, set out, started its journey and set forth over the sea, over the ocean-streams, over the waves. This changes a plain statement into something more colorful, but such descriptions take a lot of time, and the action moves slowly.

In Old English poetry, descriptions of sad events or cruel situations are commoner and in better writing than those of happiness. The men who spread stories about Beowulf and other heroes, their adventures were oral singers. There were 2 classes of singers- the gleeman, who did not create his own songs, but merely recites what he had learned from others, and the scop, the original poet, who took the crude material of legend and adventure shaped into lays. Lay in English is simply a synonym for a song, or as an archaic word for a fairly short narrative poem. Oral poetry in Old English period includes narrative forms – epic and ballad; and lyric forms –folk songs. Two ancient poems, or elegies, written in Old English tell us of the fortunes of the scop. The first of these entitled as “*Deor's Laments*”(8) and the other one is “*The Wanderer*”.

They are dramatic monologues whose speaker is unnamed and whose situation is implied rather than specified. We do not know the author of the poems but the narrator, Deor, a writer and a singer(scop) who has lost his lord's favor. So he complains, but tries to comfort himself by remembering other sorrows of the world. “That passed over; this may do so also”. The frank utterance of personal grief, the grim, stoicism and, above all, the strophic structure and the refrain, give the poem extraordinary interest.

The most part of Old English literature was religious. It was connected with spreading of Christianity in England in 7th.c. It came in two different streams, one from Rome,

one from Ireland. A high level of culture and learning was soon achieved in various monasteries; The monasteries where the art of reading and writing was practiced, became the centers of almost all the learning and education in the country. The churchman **Bede** known as the Venerable Bede (lived between 673 and 735) was a major scholar who wrote in Latin, the standard language of international scholarship. He was brought up in the monasteries of Northumbria where he got the best education of the time. He wrote *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* or “The history of the English Church” was well known in France and Italy. In *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* we learn the story of **Caedmon**, the earliest known poet of Christian England. Caedmon was a shepherd who lived at the end of 7th.c. He used to stay apart when his fellows sang songs to God; for him it was impossible. He was uneducated and could not sing. One night an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him to sing God’s praise. When he woke, he was able to sing, and part of one of his songs remains. The poems written by Caedmon consist of paraphrases of parts of Genesis, of Exodus and of Daniel. Sometimes, especially in dealing with a war-like episode, the poet expands his matter freely, treating it with all the vigor and picturesqueness of the Germanic poetry of war. If we know little of Caedmon’s life, we know still less of that of Cynewulf.

Cynewulf was a poet living a century later (at the end of 8th.c.), who was perhaps the greatest of the Anglo-Saxon poets, if we except the unknown bard who composed *Beowulf*. He wrote four poems *Juliana*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Christ*, *Elene*. The last of these seems to have been written just before poet’s death; for he says in it. ‘Now are my days in their appointed time gone away. My life-joys have disappeared, as water runs away’. Cynewulf’s poems are religious and deal with Christ’s ascension. They are notable because they are the first Anglo-Saxon works to introduce women characters. Besides the poetry attributed to Caedmon and to Cynewulf and their schools, there exist a few short poems, lyrics or ‘dramatic lyrics’ of the greatest interest, one called *The Wife’s lament*, gives us a glimpse of one of the harsh customs of our ancestors. A wife, accused of faithlessness, has been banished from her native village and compelled to live alone in the forest; from her place of exile she pours out her moan to the husband who has been estranged from her by false slanderers. *The Lover’s Message* is a kind of companion piece to this. The speaker in the little poem is the tablet of wood upon which an absent lover has carved a message to send to his beloved. It tells her that he has now a home for her in the south, and bids her as soon as she hears the cuckoo chanting of his sorrow in the copsewood to take sail over the ocean pathway to her lord, who waits and longs for her. These are the earliest recorded English love-poems.

Alfred the Great, a West Saxon King (871-99) who for a time united all the kingdoms of Southern England against a new wave of Germanic invaders, the Vikings, was no less important as a patron of literature than as a warrior. He himself translated into Old English various books of Latin prose, supervised translations by other hands, and instituted the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which may be called the first history of the early Britons; it is a continuous record, year by year, of important events in England,

around 600 to 1154. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is the oldest monument of English prose, and is, the most venerable piece of extended prose writing in an Old English. King Alfred does not seem to have succeeded in recreating a vital native literature in English, but he prepared the way for some important productions.

The sermons or *Homilies*) of the eloquent and devoted writer **Aelfric**(1000c.) rise to the rank of literature, by reason of the picturesqueness of some religious legend which they treat, by the fervor of their piety, and by reason of their rhythmic, poetic style. Aelfric wrote out in Old English the meaning of the first seven books of the Bible. His prose style is the best in Old English, and he uses alliteration to join his sentences together.

Thus the literature of the early Middle ages and the church taught that man was an evil being and his life on earth was a sinful life. As man was subordinated to God, he had to prepare himself for the after-life by subduing his passions and disregarding all earthly cares.

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