
The Key Literary Works Of Old English Period

Many people think English history started with the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invasion in 449. The Germanic invaders took over the island's southeast portion and named it 'Angle-land'. The AngloSaxon Language, now called Old English, started as mixture of Germanic dialects. Although modern English has many Old English words, Old English itself has largely dissapered.

Long before the AngloSaxon settlers came, the earliest known inhabitants, the Celts, settled Britain. The Celts had migrated from Europe in 800 BC. One tribe of the Celts was Brythons, and another was the Gals. In the A.D 43 The Roman legions began an invasion leading to conquest of the lowlands of Britain. Most Britons have been driven to go north to what is now Scotland and west to what is now Wales. The others had to be slave. The Romans introduced Christianity to the Celts in time as well. Finally, Rome itself was beset by German invasion and the Roman armies had withdrawn from Britain by the early fifth century. Britain left on its own. Eventually, the Anglo-Saxons split the land into many small tribal kingdoms.

After the Anglo-Saxon inavisons, Christianity in Britain only survived in the far-west regions, where many ,british had fled. In 596, missioners re-establish Christianity in England. The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in South eastern England had become Christian by the end of seventh century. Additionally, missionaries and monks ultimately brought England literacy using Latin as the language of literature and scholarship.

Literature of Anglo-Saxon Times

The Anglo-Saxon period left a wealth of linguistic and literary heritage. The two major influences on Anglo-Saxon, literature was the Anglo-Saxon Germanic traditions and the Roman church's Christian practices. There were various Germanic dialects spoken by the early Anglo-Saxons, a combinations of which formed the basis of old English. Anglo-Saxon story tellers also produced heroic verses that glorify earthly values and problems, such as bravery and loyalty which are vital to Anglo-Saxon life. The early Anglo-Saxons had a rich oral tradition of songs and stories about the courages of warrior's valiant battles. With the spread of illiteracy, the oral tradition of songs and tales became the Anglo-Saxons' main literary entertainment. Christian monks founded libraries and schools within their monasteries as Christianity spread through Anglo-Saxon England, where they emphasized the importance of the written word espacially the bible. Their effect on scholarship and education resulted in the English people and other religious and historical writings of the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede's Ecclesiastical History. Almost all the Old English poetry preserved comes from four manuscript, and the Vercelli Library. There are three main types of poetry in these manuscripts:

1. Heroic verse celebrates courage, honour and loyalty;
2. The elegy mourns nature of life
3. Religious verse focuses on christian teachings and falk.

Some poetry, like Beowulf, include all three types.

Old English poems have a meter similarity - the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that gives its rhythm to a line of poetry.

Beowulf

Beowulf is one of the most important epic poetry in Old English Literature. Its writer isn't known. It is an anonymous poetry. It is the oldest epic of Europe. It is older than German Nibelungen Lied, Spanish Poema del Cid and French Chanson de Roland. But unfortunately, it doesn't mention England or English. It states about events in Denmark and Sweden and Beowulf is a Geat which means he is from South Sweden. Shortly this epic mentions Beowulf's fight against Grendel, Dragon and Grendel's Mother. Beowulf defeated all of them because he is the strongest of thirty others.

King Hrothgar, the Danish king, is disturbed by the rampages of a demon Grendel attacking the prosperous meadhall of King Hrothgar, Heorot, murdering and sometimes eating Danish warriors. Hrothgar was in his time a great warrior, but now he's an old king and he doesn't seem to be able to protect his men. Thankfully, a young Geat warrior called Beowulf is coming from his own country overseas to Heorot Hall to lend a helping hand literally. Beowulf agrees to battle Grendel himself after explaining that he owes Hrothgar a favor because Hrothgar supported his uncle. King Hrothgar accepts his proposal with appreciation. Beowulf is waiting for him the next time Grendel assaults Heorot House. Choosing to battle Grendel in hand-to-hand combat, Beowulf submits the demon and finally cuts off his arm at the elbow. Grendel flees into the woods and dies fatally wounded. Beowulf, Hrothgar, and their supporters were having a wild party. Hrothgar also gives Beowulf many gifts and treasures to reward him for his demon's heroic defeat. Sadly, Grendel has a mother who is overprotective and wants to avenge her son. She targets Heorot Hall while all the warriors sleep off the battle. But when the guerrillas wake up, she panics and flees back to her den, a cave below a nearby lake. Beowulf, his Geatish troops, and some Danish warriors from Hrothgar are pursuing her there. Beowulf dives into the lake and finds the cave where, in another one-on-one fight, he takes Grendel's wife. Seizing a nearby sword from the treasure cache of Grendel's wife, he kills her, even though the blade is melted by her toxic demon blood. The Danish warriors gave him up for dead when Beowulf returned to the sea, bearing the sword hilt and Grendel's cut ear, but his own Geatish followers are still waiting patiently. When everyone sees that this second challenge has been survived by Beowulf, there is even more gift-giving and partying. The Geats finally take leave of the Danes; Beowulf says goodbye to King Hrothgar and sails back to Geatland, where he's a lord in King Hygelac's palace. Finally, in numerous blood feuds, Hygelac and all his family are killed and Beowulf becomes the King of the Geats. For fifty years, Beowulf reigns as king, defending the Geats against all the other tribes around them, especially the Swedes. He is a noble and valiant king of warriors, rewarding his faithful thanes (lords of warriors) and caring for his men. The Geats build a huge funeral pyre for him after Beowulf's death, heaped up with riches. They spend ten days building a huge barrow (a large earth mound filled with treasure) as a memorial to their fallen king once the pyre has burned down.

Other great works of Old English poetry also include Wanderer, The Seafarer, Maldon's Battle, and The Rood's Dream. This poetry is alliterative; kenning, a metaphorical word used instead of a common noun, is one of its characteristics. Caedmon, considered the first Old English Christian poet, and Cynewulf are two known poets from this period. Old English poetry has almost completely survived in four manuscripts: the Junius Manuscript, the Exeter Book, the

Vercelli Book, and the Beowulf Manuscript. Old English prose works contain legal writings, medical leaflets, religious texts, and Latin and other language translations. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a historical record beginning about the reign of King Alfred (871/899) and lasting for more than three centuries, is particularly noteworthy.

The poems Elene, Juliana, and The Fates of the Apostles are written by Cynewulf, a later poet; he is no longer known. The finest poem of the school of Cynewulf is The Dream of the Rood, the first known example of the dream vision, a genre later popular in Middle English literature. Other Old English poems include various riddles, charms, saints' lives, gnomic poetry.

The Wanderer

Essentially a monolog set within a frame, this 115-line poem creates two personae — the anonymous writer who briefly introduces and ends, and the Wanderer, an elderly warrior who roams around the world looking for shelter and support. The monolog of the Wanderer is divided into two distinct parts, the first being a lament for his exile and the loss of his king's family, friends, home, and kindness. He finds no comfort in nature because he has set sail on the windy sea. The speaker poignantly dreams of being among his companions and embracing his king, only to wake up in front of the gray winter sea and hail-mixed snowfall. The Wanderer reflects more generally on the destiny of man in the second portion of the monolog, urging resignation and control of emotion as ways to meet adversity. He sees the devastation that has befallen civilizations other than his own from the broken walls and towns he visits on his journeys. This part of the poem introduces the *ubi sunt* theme as the Wanderer asks what has become of the things he has learned and discovers that many have vanished and everything else is temporary. The poem, like much other Anglo-Saxon poetry, links pagan and Christian values in an uneasy combination. The authorial voice begins and concludes the poem, referring to God and stressing the importance of faith, themes absent from the Wanderer's speech. The Wanderer's lament, even in the voice of an outcast, upholds Anglo-Saxon tribal values, notably loyalty, generosity, courage, and physical strength. It reflects an overriding concern with the grim and somber aspects of nature and with the power of fate, against which an aged man can pit only resignation and inner restraint. Written in unrhymed Old English alliterative verse, the poem is most readily accessible in modern prose translations.

The Seafarer

In 'The Seafarer,' the elderly seafarer reminisces about his life spent sailing on the open ocean. He describes the hardships of life on the sea, the beauty of nature, and his love of seafaring. The end of the poem consists of a long meditation on God and the righteous path to heaven. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker describes the often dreary and lonely life of a seafarer. He contrasts this with the relatively easy life of land dwellers, who have ready access to food and wine. Season change, and the seafarer's tone changes from one of loneliness to adventure. He loves sailing, and despite the hardships of life on the ocean, he enjoys his time there. The sea imagery recedes, and the seafarer speaks entirely of God, Heaven, and the soul. He ends the poem with a series of gnomic phrases on these themes.

The Battle of Maldon

Old English heroic poem detailing a legendary skirmish between East Saxons and (mostly

Norwegian) 991 raiders. It is incomplete, its beginning and ending both lost. The poem is remarkable for its vivid, dramatic combat scenes and for its expression of the Germanic ethos of loyalty to a leader. The poem, as it survives, opens with the war parties aligned on either side of a stream. The Vikings offer the cynical suggestion that the English may buy their peace with golden rings. The English commander Earl Byrhtnoth replies that they will pay their tribute in spears and darts. When the Vikings cannot advance because of their poor position, Byrhtnoth recklessly allows them safe conduct across the stream, and the battle follows. In spite of Byrhtnoth's supreme feats of courage, he is finally slain. In panic some of the English warriors desert.

Most of the old English poets are anonymous; twelve are known by name from medieval sources, but only four are known to us today with any certainty from their vernacular works: Caedmon, Bede, Alfred, and Cynewulf. Of these, biographies are credited only to Caedmon, Bede, and Alfred. Caedmon is Old English poetry's best-known and considered father.

Widsith

Modern English Far Traveler, Old English poem preserved in the Exeter Library, possibly from the 7th century, a compilation of Old English poetry from the 10th century. "Widsith" is an idealized self-portrait of a scop (minstrel) of the Germanic heroic age who wandered widely and was welcomed in many mead halls, where he entertained the great of many kingdoms. Because the heroic figures the minstrel claims to have visited range from the 4th to the 6th century, the poem is obviously a fictitious account; nevertheless It is an excellent compendium of important figures in the Germanic hero myth and an exemplary record of the role of the scop in early Germanic society.