



STUDY MATERIAL

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AN OVERVIEW OF ANGLO-SAXON OR OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE :

It has always been humans' instinct to express their aesthetic sense and artistic skill to rejoice and literature is one of the most expressive and finest forms to present different aspects and feelings of humans. The literature, especially poetry, has been existed since there was no means of writing it and it gradually developed from oral to written. The literature of the Anglo-saxons is fortunately one of the richest and most significant of any preserved among the early Germanic peoples. Before we start reading the history of English literature, it is very essential to have an idea of the historical background of that country.

Early History of England

It has been observed that 'the early history of Britain is essentially the history of its invaders'. The Celts, Romans, Anglo-saxons and the Normans were a few of the more important conquerers of England. Around 500 BC, streams of invaders known as 'Celts' arrived on the shores of England. The Celts were made up of numerous tribes and invaded England in waves. The earliest to arrive were the Gales who invade the western and northern parts of the country. The Britons came next and occupied most of the present-day England and Wales. The name 'Britain' is taken from this branch of the Celts.

Even as the Celtic tribes kept arriving on English shores, the Roman Empire was flourishing. In 55 BC; Julius Caesar made his first expedition to Britain and learnt that the land was fertile and the people weak. He was, however, more interested in the conquest of Gaul and Britain was left to itself for nearly a hundred years. In 43 AD, Emperor Claudius invaded Britain and the Romans stayed on for nearly three hundred years. England became a province of the vast Roman Empire. Christianity was introduced sometime during the second century. The Britains were civilised into an orderly community.

There were constant attacks from Celtic tribes settled in Ireland and Scotland, and even as the Britains were struggling against them, a new danger appeared in the form of Anglo-saxon sea rovers. For about one and a half centuries (from 450 AD to 600 AD) Britain was under the Angles, Saxons and the Jutes, who migrated to Britain from northern Germany. They were barbarians when compared to the highly civilised Romans. The Anglo-saxons formed seven kingdoms known as Heptarchy (Greek word meaning 'rule of seven'). The

seven kingdoms were Kent, Essex, Sussex, Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria. These kingdoms fought against each other for supremacy. King Egbert of Wessex, who established the supremacy of his kingdom, is considered to be the first king of England.

The Anglo-saxons had a greater influence on the Britons than the Romans. English is derived from the Anglo-saxon language and not from Latin. The Anglo-saxons were fond of stories and often gathered around the fire to listen to tales of battle. The wandering minstrel used to narrate tales of courage and endurance which stirred the spirit of the listeners. The most famous of these is Beowulf, a collection of pagan tales and historical events containing more than 3000 lines. It gives us a very accurate picture of the courageous Anglo-saxons. The first English poet known by name was Caedmon, who lived during the 600s. Another poet of Anglo-saxon times was Cynewulf. We see a fusion of paganism and Christianity in their poetry.

Sometimes during the 500s, Christianity was reintroduced to England for the second time. A monk named Augustine was sent by the Pope to convert Ethelbert, King of Jutes, to Christianity. During the 800s, the Danes (or Vikings), a seafaring people, attacked England and easily conquered the Anglo-saxon kingdoms. Alfred the Great, the Anglo-saxon king of Wessex, resisted the Danish attacks. As long as he continued to rule, the Danes could not extend their Danelaw (the parts of England under Danish rule) in Wessex. After King Alfred died in 899, Wessex became weak and gradually the Anglo-saxons were crushed. The last great Saxon king was Edward the Confessor who ruled till 1066.

According to M.H. Abrams, the Anglo-Saxon period extends from about 450 to 1066 A.D. The periods of English Literature are matters of convenience and the dividing lines between them are purely arbitrary. But within each of the periods it is possible to recognize certain broad characteristics and certain special developments that take place.

It is certain that only a portion of Old English poetry has survived, though it would appear likely that the surviving portion is representative. The manuscripts in which the poetry is preserved are late in date, are unique, and are four in number. They are –

- 1) *The Beowulf MS* (containing Beowulf and Judith)
- 2) *The Junius MS* (containing the so-called Caedmonian poems)
- 3) *The Exeter Book* (containing two of the signed poems of Cynewulf)

- 4) *The Vercelli Book* (containing also two of the signed poems of Cynewulf, including *Elene* and *The Dream of the Rood*)

The corpus of Anglo-saxon or Old English Literature may broadly be divided into the following categories-

- ❖ **Anglo-saxon pagan or pre-Christian poetry.**
(Anglo-saxon Heroic poetry, Anglo-saxon lyric and elegiac poetry)
- ❖ **Anglo-saxon Christian poetry.**
(the Caedmonian and Cynewulfian poems)
- ❖ **Anglo-saxon prose.**

The names of important Anglo-saxon poetry, Anglo-saxon prose writers and their works are cited below:-

Anglo-saxon pagan or pre-Christian poetry:

Anglo-saxon Heroic poetry

- Beowulf
- Widsith
- The Battle of Brunanburh
- The Fight at Finnsburh
- Waldere
- The Battle of Maldon

Anglo-saxon Lyric and Elegiac poetry

- The Wanderer
- The Seafarer
- Deor's Lament or The Complaint of Deor
- The Ruined Burg or The Ruin
- The Husband's Message
- Wulf and Eadwacer

Anglo-saxon Christian poetry

Caedmonian poems

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Daniel
- Judith
- Christ and Satan

Cynewulfian poems

- Elene
- Christ
- Juliana
- The Fates of the Apostles

Other poems with Cynewulfian influences

- The Dream of the Rood
- The Lives of the Saints
- The Phoenix

Anglo-saxon prose-writers and their works

➤ Alfred the Great

- His translation of Pope Gregory the Great's *Cura pastoralis*.
- A translation of the *Historia adversus pagonos* of Paulus Orosius.
- A version of Boethius' *De consolation philosophiae*, originally written in prose but with verse renderings of Boethius which were added later.
- A translation of St. Augustine's *Soliloquia*- probably Alfred's final work.
- A translation of a shortened version of Bede's Latin work, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* (The Ecclesiastical History of the English People)

A great deal of information about Alfred is given in *De rebus getis Alfredi magni* by Asser, a Welsh monk who was his friend and teacher. Written in Latin, it chronicles Alfred's life as well as important national events.

➤ **Aelfric**

- A Latin grammar and glossary, and the colloquy, a primer with a parallel Old English/Latin text.
- Two sets of homilies in Old English (largely based on the writings of Bede, St Augustine and Pope Gregory)
- A translation of Bede's *De temporibus*.

Copied throughout the Middle Ages, Aelfric's writings became the first Old English works to be printed.

➤ **Wulfstan**

- Old English homilies, tracts and law codes.
- *Sermo lupi and anglos*.
- Canons of Edgar
- The Institutes of Polity.

The Anglo-saxon Chronicles

The Chronicle is the collective name for the seven surviving manuscripts and a fragment which provide the fundamental narrative source for the Anglo-saxon times. It is the main literary source for Anglo-saxon history, beginning in the reign of King Alfred (871-99) and continuing in the Petersborough version until 1154.

The Anglo-saxon Chronicle records the births and deaths of Kings beginning with Caesar and the installations of bishops which the monks of various monasteries were in the habit of making on the Easter rolls. Thus, it was written by many monks at different places. It is of great historical value as it sheds light on the social and political situations in English of the ages it covers. Records of ravages and destructions with fire and sword appear in almost every page, and the state of lawlessness that prevailed during the long period. From the literary point of view it is of immense value. It marks the growth of the prose style. David Daiches writes: "**The continuity of English prose from the Old English periods to the**

Middle English period is demonstrated by the Chronicle more clearly than anywhere else and its different manuscripts are of prime importance for the students of the English language”

Literary Characteristics of Old English Literature

- **Extremely social in its content** : It is, infact, a kind of social document for primitive Teutonic life.
- **Idealistic outlook**: Both the Christian and the non-Christian types of poetry are essentially idealistic.
- **Excellence of descriptions**: The picturesque representations of different elements- the sea, the battle-field, the royal court, the ruined city, and so on- are well marked in pagan as well as Christian poems.
- **Love for nature**: Old English poetry represents the English love of nature which is found today a very important feature in English poetry.
- **Strain of melancholy**: A strain of melancholy runs all through Anglo-saxon poetry in a greater or lesser measure.
- **A characteristic technique of its own in versification**: It has, in the main, alliterative and irregular verses. The employment of assonance, the use of synonymms and the presence of metaphorical expressions are quite common.
- **Anonymous Origins**: Of all the Old English poets, we have direct mention of only one Caedmon, though not one of the extant poem.
- **The imitative Quality**: Much of the prose and some of the poetry is translated or adapted from the Latin, though the debt to the original varies greatly.
- **Nationalistic**: The prose written by the Anglo-saxons takes place wholly in England and owes nothing to Germanic origins, and, it is the result of the Christianisation of England. Hence, it is essentially nationalistic in spirit.

Suggested Readings:

- Aditi Chowdhury and Rita Goswami: A History of English Literature: Traversing the Centuries
- Edward Albert: History of English Literature
- Padmaja Ashok: The Social History of England
- Bibhash Choudhury: English Social and Cultural History