

OE LITERATURE (5th century – 1066)

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE GERMANIC CONQUEST OF BRITAIN

In the 5th century, after the decline of the Roman Empire, Germanic tribes (the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes) invaded and settled Britain. They came from Denmark, Norway, and the northern part of Germany. Most important became the language of the Angles and the Saxons. The indigenous Celts, who were christianized by the Romans, were driven to the remote areas of Wales, Scotland, Cornwall, and Ireland by the more powerful pagan Germanic tribes. The new name Angli was used for all inhabitants. In the 6th century missionaries from Rome and Ireland began the christianization, which didn't finish until the 8th century. In the 7th and 8th century England was divided into six OE kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, York, Kent, and Wessex. Gradually the kingdoms merged, with the help of King Alfred, because of the Viking attacks. England became divided (The Battle of Edington) into the western part, which was under the control of Wessex and King Alfred, and the eastern part controlled by the Vikings (Danelaw).

2. THE CULTURE, LANGUAGE, AND CIVILISATION OF THE OE PERIOD

Prior to 1066 there was a bilingual situation in England. The OE vernacular was spoken by the majority of the population, Latin on the other hand was the language of the church. The OE language was divided into four major dialects. One of them, the West-Saxon dialect, became the norm and was called King's English. It was highly inflected and had many borrowings from the Scandinavian languages and Latin. Runic letters were still being used in the north of the country. Most of the OE literature prior to the 8th century was transmitted orally. In the 8th century we get the first manuscripts: the Beowulf MS, the Exeter MS, the Junius MS, and the Vercelli MS. The MSS were written down on parchments by monks in scriptoria. The main literary genres were: the OE religious poetry (impact of Christianity), the heroic epic, the semi-religious poetry, the OE lyrical poetry, sermons, and historical works written down by monks. An allegorical approach is used, texts are full of metaphors. Images of evil/dark and good/light are constantly juxtaposed. Images of chaos (lawlessness, paganism) vs. order (Christianity) appear a lot. There is an apocalyptic view of the world. The feudal society of that time had a strict hierarchical structure with the King on top, Lords in the middle, and their subjects on the bottom. Loyalty, courage, and heroism were traits highly valued.

3. KING ALFRED AND HIS LITERARY PROGRAM

King Alfred reigned Wessex from 871 to 899. His dialect became the norm and was called King's English. On one hand he is known as a military leader, on the other hand he loved literature, and is also famous as a translator. His plan was to translate as many books as he could from Latin into OE. He »imported« many educated people from Europe to help him translate important works. He wanted to bring culture and tradition to ordinary people. The time of King Alfred's reign was the time of »flowering of letters«. His translations were not literal, they were paraphrases. They were changed to such a degree that they could be considered original. The original text in Latin was a pretext, a backbone, the translation was a meta-text, a variable. King Alfred was also very much interested in the spreading of Christianity which became a formal religion in Wessex in the second part of his reign. His first translation was the Pastoral Care, originally written by Pope Gregory. In his famous Preface Alfred explains his plans: he wants to create a body of the most important works and make them available to all people. He also says that not only religious literature is important. He wanted to create a liberal educational system in England, which would go beyond religious education (trivium, quadrivium). Some other works, which he translated were: Universal History by Orosius, The Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius, Soliloquies by St. Augustine, and The Ecclesiastical History of the English People by Bede the Venerable. Also very important is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which was compiled from the year 890 until the middle of the 12th century.

4. THE FILM DISCUSSION BASED ON KING ALFRED'S LIFE AS A MILITARY LEADER

The film deals with the split personality of King Alfred. While Old England is being ransacked by roving Danes, King Alfred is planning to join the priesthood. But observing the rape of his land, he is forced to put away his religious vows to take up arms against the invaders, leading the English Christians to fight for their country. Although he swore he would never use a sword again he fights the lawlessness and chaos of the pagan Danes. Soon he has to face a difficult decision: in order to preserve peace he has to pay 12,000 Marks to the Danes and also give them his wife. The national interest goes before the private and Aelswith has to go with the Viking Chief Guthrum. Although Alfred still longs for the priesthood, he is torn between his passion for God and his lust for blood. In May 878 King Alfred defeated Guthrum and the Danes in the Battle of Eddington. The Danes were heavily defeated to such an extent that they were pushed back to East Anglia and Guthrum converted to Christianity. Alfred and his wife were reunited. Very helpful were the military techniques used by King Alfred. He highly admired the ancient traditional Greco-Roman culture and thus employed some of the techniques of classical Greek and Roman fighting.

5. OE PROSE – OTHER THAN KING ALFRED'S TRANSLATIONS

They were mostly monks who wrote sermons and homilies. Aethelwold was one of the Benedictine monks who wrote down his sermons during the benedictine revival in the 10th century and he also translated the Latin work Rule of San Benedict into OE. He was much more educated, erudite, and versatile than King Alfred was. Wulfstan is known for his sermon A Sermon of Wulfstan to The English. The point of the sermon was that the Vikings are plundering the country because the English people had too many sins. Aelfric was the most extensive of the three. He wrote sermons and homilies in order to help new monks (textbooks). He uses a lot of alliteration in his writing.

6. OE RELIGIOUS POETRY (CAEDMON, CYNEWULF)

OE religious poetry started to flourish in the mid 8th century in the OE kingdom of Northumbria where most manuscripts were produced, especially during the reign of King Edwin. The first Anglo-Saxon poet was a monk called Caedmon, and he wrote the work Hymn where he praises the divine existence. The poem consists of only nine lines of verse. In it, God is described almost as an earthly lord. It was composed orally. Another important poet of that time was Cynewulf, who was much superior to Caedmon as far as technique is concerned. He wrote poems called biblical paraphrases: The Ascension, The Fate of The Apostels, Elene, Juliana. In the last two poems mentioned he introduces women into poetry, which is new. They are shown as down-to-earth figures and not as saints. His poems are complex, meditative, and philosophical.

7. THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

The poem was produced in Northumbria in the 9th century by an anonymus author. It is the start of a new genre – the dream vision genre. This genre describes a vision in a dream the speaker has; the vision is often a religious, mystic one. According to the preserved materials this poem is »based on« an actual cross – the Ruthwell cross. The poem is divided into three parts. PART 1: TREE, PRECHRISTIAN SYMBOL: The speaker has a dream and tells about it to a group of people. He tells about the vision of a cross. The cross is personified. It speaks of its history, of the time it was only a tree and how it came to be a cross. Eventually it came to be the cross that Jesus carried. PART 2: CHRISTIAN SYMBOL: The cross urges the speaker to travel and spread the cult of the cross. PART 3: ICON, INSTRUMENT OF FINDING THE MEANING OF LIFE: The speaker awakens from the dream and finds his life changed. He decides to follow the cult of the cross and to spread it.

8. THE WANDERER, THE SEAFARER

The Wanderer describes a feudal lord and his suffering when he wanders the world aimlessly. He has no king, his life is without meaning. He has no land, and he is lost in this world. He does not believe in God. He accepts his fate stoically and feels very lonely and isolated. W. H. Auden used this poem as a pretext because of its existential theme. The Seafarer describes a seafarer, who is in a self-imposed exile. His adventures are symbolical in meaning. Every adventure is a certain temptation that he overcomes in the end. He describes his life back on the mainland which he does not like. He yearns to go back to sea. Themes of both works are: exile, survivor (the last of the kind), battle, inner isolation, power of fate, the transience of life,...

9. OE NON-RELIGIOUS POETRY

Widsith was a non-religious OE poet. He claims that it is important to criticize bad kings and praise good ones. It is important to preserve heroic deeds of a particular nation. Poems are important in transmitting it from one generation to another. There were apocalyptic poems (The Ruin, The Riddles), companion poems (The Wife's Lament & The Husband's Message), animal poems (The Whale, The Phoenix), and Elegies (a group of poems paying respect to historical persons (kings), but also examining the purpose of man's life.

10. OE HEROIC VERSE

Epic poetry tends to be narrative and long, there are many events like in a novel. The hero is the main protagonist. The Germanic tribes brought with them a fully developed system of versification. In the OE historic tradition the basic unit of verse consisted of an essentially short verse which contained varying number of syllables at least one of which was accented. These accents were grammatical because the accent fell on that syllable which would normally carry the stress in that particular grammatical structure. The OE alliterative verse consisted of two half lines (a hemistich), separated by a break (caesura), which was not only thematic but also structural and phonetic. The first half line was called the on-verse and the second half line the off-verse. They were linked together by the alliterating sound (stave). Various tropes were used to make certain descriptions more elevated: VARIATION – repeats the information that was given in the first line, in the second line (connected with parallelism), KENNING – a descriptive compound, some kind of a primitive OE metaphor by putting together a noun and another part of speech (a seagoer = a sailor), HEITI – similar to kenning; it represents the substitution of one noun for another (a spear = wood), UNDERSTATEMENT – description of a person or thing by stating its negative, opposite. There were also heroic lays written, which were shorter than heroic epics. Lays were very dramatic short narrative poems, which celebrated the courage of the protagonist, included many elements of the folklore, supernatural beings. One of the most common themes was the sacrifice for one's king.

11. BEOWULF (STRUCTURE, REFERENCE TO THE SOCIAL CONTEXT, CRITICAL APPROACHES, STYLISTIC DEVICES, IMAGERY)

Beowulf is the first major narrative poem in English. It has been preserved as the Cotton manuscript. It is very long – almost 3000 lines of verse grouped together into fitts (43 fitts – sections). It was probably the work of many different authors which are referred to as Beowulf-the-poet. The poem consists of two parts. The first part talks about the young hero warrior Beowulf who comes from Geatland to the Danish kingdom in order to help king Hrothgar get rid of the monster Grendel. The pagan hero is successful. In the beginning, the destruction of one of the main symbols of unity and power of the Danish kingdom - Heorot - the Mead-Hall - is anticipated. We learn that the external destruction is objectivised in the monster Grendel, which symbolizes the internal weakness of the Danish society. The reasons for the destruction would be the inability to preserve the typical feudal relationship, and the absence of loyalty of the lords to their king. The second part takes place in Geatland, where Beowulf is now the king. He is very old. He goes off to fight a dragon which is destroying the country, because some slave had stolen its treasure. With the help of Wiglaf he succeeds to kill the dragon but dies in the process. The epic ends with the description of Beowulf's pagan burial. Beowulf has to die because of the wrong motive; he pursues the dragon only because of the treasure (the cult of gold). He is not a very good king. Beowulf is written in the OE alliterative verse, which consists of two half lines (a hemistich), that is of a on-line and a off-line, separated by a break (caesura). Both half lines are linked together by the alliterating sound (stave). The stylistic devices that were used in Beowulf are: variation, kenning, heiti, and understatement. The main parts of the epic are pagan and it is believed that the Christianic parts were added later on. There is a constant contrast between light and darkness. When people are awake (light) they are more ready to face danger and evil. When they are asleep (night, darkness) is the time when they are vulnerable. Heorot is a bright and shiny place, whereas Grendel's place is dark. Critics say that the general structure is about the exchange of thesis and antithesis. The epic wanted to set an example, to establish a code of heroic behaviour and feudal hierarchy. The destruction of one's kingdom is possible only because of the lack of internal unity. The themes of the epic are: the struggle between good and bad, the theme of a good king, blood relationship (fratricide, patricide), revenge (a spiryt that never ends), and the transience of life.

ME LITERATURE (1066 – 1485)

1. THE NORMAN CONQUEST (LANGUAGE, LITERATURE DEVELOPEMENT)

In 1066 the Normans invaded Britain under the leadership of William the Conqueror, and conquered it (Battle of Hastings). Since the conquest onwards, we can speak about the gradual disappearance of the OE language. It became of minor importance although it was spoken by 90% of the population (Anglo-Saxons). 10% of the population were the Normans who spoke Norman French. The French were the ruling class but didn't treat their subjects badly, they wanted to mix with the A-S population. There was a bilingual situation where two cultures co-existed. From the 12th century onwards we can talk about the fusion of the two cultures. The superstratum (Normans) and the stratum (Anglo-Saxons) evolved into Middle English. English established itself as a national language and it was greatly enriched with over 10,000 French words. It was also simplified because the French could not understand it. ME could be described as a hybrid between the Germanic OE, French, and also Latin. The French influence is shown also in new literary themes. New medieval themes emerged: courtly love, chivalry, the Church. For the first time England became a part of the European tradition. There were five dialects: the Northumbrian dialect, the East Midland dialect, the West Midland dialect, the Kentish dialect, and the Southern dialect. A discrepancy emerged between pronunciation and spelling. The religious center moved Winchester to Canterbury.

2. THE BENEDICTINE REVIVAL (WULFSTAN)

During the 12th century, soon after the Norman conquest, there emerged the Benedictine revival. Its protagonist was a monk called Wulfstan who wanted to revive the OE language and the OE alliterative verse. The Revival lasted for only a short time and was not successful.

3. EUROPEAN INFLUENCES ON THE ME LITERATURE

ME literature reflects the dilemma between the personal and the demands of the feudal society. How to be true to yourself and at the same time loyal to your king, is the theme of many literary works of that time. The OE alliterative line was gradually replaced by the syllabic line. An accentual-syllabic versification system emerges. Allegorical representation becomes the main metaphorical representation of reality. One of the main literary influences was a French allegorical novel Roman de la Rose, which was translated by G. Chaucer. The ME literature was multilingual (French, Latin, ME).

4. ME SCHOLARSHIP

The schools in the ME period were called scriptoria and were organized by monks. Non-religious learning developed. These universities were divided into two parts: TRIVIUM, where they taught grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and QUADRIVIUM, where they taught astronomy, music, geometry, and arithmetic. It was very important how things were presented, not so much the content. Originality was of minor importance, since prescribed rules of expression had to be followed. The writer always had in mind the target audience and tried to make his art communicative. Students freely moved around Europe and were accepted everywhere. They were not limited to national or political borders.

5. COURTLY LOVE AND ITS INFLUENCE (ROMANTIC LOVE)

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