

Anglo-Saxon Prose

The literature at the earliest stage in almost all languages was generally composed in verse; at least the earliest piece of literature in most of the languages was poetry. It can be said that any composition in verse may be reckoned example of literary art but this does not hold for prose compositions. Prose is comparatively a later addition to the field of literature. The reason may be, as Coleridge says, "the poets' deliberate intention to use a language differing in spirit and purpose from that of ordinary life" or as Wordsworth says, "for the sake of pleasing uniformity and regularity and also as an aid to memory". It may also be recalled that the modern literature is the offspring of the earlier oral formulaic poetry which used to be transmitted orally. But English prose did not delay too much to join the queue of literary compositions. Venerable Bede(673-735), King Alfred(849-99), Aelfric, abbot of Eynsham(in 1005) and Wulfstan, Archbishop of York (from 1002 to 1023) contributed much to English prose literature.

King Alfred is regarded as the father of English prose. Although before Alfred there were some prose writings, for examples, The Laws of Inn and the first pages of the Chronicle which were kept in various monasteries, the prose works were simply the transcriptions of spoken language and syntax. Literary prose did not begin until the 9th century. It was King Alfred who aimed at educating the people when the knowledge of Latin was declining. Alfred's own written works were translations, but he often added new materials to his sources. Their order is uncertain but those that survive are:-

- 1) The translation of Gregory, the Great's Cura Pastoralis, a manual of instruction for the clergy, to which Alfred added a preface describing the contemporary decline in learning, and outlining his intention to make education more readily available.
- 2) Translation of the Historea Adversus Paganos of Paulus Orosius, a text book of universal history to which Alfred added account of the experiences of contemporary travellers.
- 3) A version of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae.
- 4) A translation of Augustine's Soliloquia which was probably Alfred's final work.

Alfred must have seen Cura Pastoralis as an essential plan in his educational reform. The main book was about church reform but Alfred chose it as an elementary thing for religion. The translation of Orosius's Historea Adversus Paganos is wide ranging and his translation became a book of the History and Geography of the known world.

Another important work of Alfred was Handbook which contains extracts from the Bible. Lastly, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was also inspired and organized by Alfred. It is the oldest monument of the English prose recording the history of England from the time of the Roman occupation to the middle of the 12th century. The prose of King Alfred was a highly Latinized one. He gave English prose its style and dignity by introducing many Latin elements into it and by translating Latin books. The critics, as usual, are divided in their opinions, whether Alfred or Bede or Aelfric should be called the father of English prose. Bede's language was a mixture of Wessex and American dialects. Next, Aelfric might be called the father of English prose as he was pure in dialect, but the title is conferred on Alfred because he made a good start.

Aelfric (955-1020) was a scholarly, cultured person and a good Latinist. He was a church man who led the cultural revival of his age. He was a versatile genius who wrote a higher, clear and more musical prose, whose source was the abundant stock of sermons and other religious writings in Latin. He made particular use of Gregory, Bede and Augustine. He treated his sources with great freedom adapting the materials to the needs of English Pastor (Clergyman) and flock. Aelfric's famous work is Catholic Homilies. It is largely scriptural and exegetical (explanatory). His next famous work is Lives of saints which is legendary and didactic. He was highly a stylist and a good grammarian who wrote Grammar and Glossary on Latin. Lives Of Saints was a unique work of that time, in which he used old alliterative and rhythmical style and antithesis. But some critics comment that he borrowed it from Old English Poetry. He used direct method and this is why he was the most effective. W.P. Ker described

him as "the great master of prose in all its forms." Another work of Aelfric, which deserves mention, is his translation of the first seven Books of the Bible.

The chief literary contemporary of Aelfric was his friend, Wulfstan, Bishop of London (996-1002), Bishop of Worcester (1002-1016) and Archbishop of York (1016-1023). He is best known as a homilist and his literary fame rests mainly on a single homily composed in the year 1014: Sermo Lupi ad Anglos which was typical for its sheer force and vigour, its repetition of ideas and the alliterative nature of his style. His prose had all delights of poetry. It was fluent and powerful. It is the most forceful prose in Old English literature. Aelfric's style was that of a teacher and Wulfstan's was that of a preacher. The sermons of Aelfric were written to instruct and those of Wulfstan to move.

Another prose writer of Anglo-Saxon period is Aethelwald, Aelfric's master. His important work is the translation of Rule of St. Benedict in about 960. The extant copies of this work all go back to a text made for nuns but the original text presumably was made for monks weak in Latin.

On the whole Anglo-Saxon prose is much nearer to Anglo-Saxon poetry than to Modern English. The poetry was archaic retaining solid words and expressions. When the revolution came in the form of the Norman Conquest in England, poetry was almost destroyed. But prose on the contrary suffered no such break with the past.

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HISTORY OF LITERATURE ANGLO-SAXON MANUSCRIPTS

In the later half of the fifth century three Germanic tribes Angles, Saxons and Jutes invaded Britain. The Saxons came, according to Bede, from the country south of Denmark and east of Holland, the Angles from modern Juteland and the Jutes from the country east of the lower Rhine.

These people were pagan. In 597 Augustine came from Rome and he began to convert the Jutes in Kent. But peculiarly some of the literature which they brought from their homes had relations to Christianity. He had been sent by Gregory, the Great and he converted Aethelberht, King of Kent and he established the seat of bishopric at Canterbury. But it took a long time to convert the commonplace people. It was possible only when the Celtic missionaries from Ireland and Scotland came.

Our knowledge on the Anglo-Saxon literature is based mainly on four manuscripts.

1. **Junius Ms:** It was given to Bodlian Library by the Dutch scholar Francis Dujon or Junius who was Milton's friend. It was first printed in 1655. In this manuscript we find the poems supposed to have been written by Caedmon; they are *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel* and *Christ & Satan*. According to Bede these poems were written by Caedmon. Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Race/People* wrote how his lay brother in St. Hildas Abbey Caedmon was visited and influenced by an angel, to write poems on biblical theme. But the modern lemon-squeezing critics, in their usual way, are unwilling to accept Bede's statement. They argue that these poems were written by not a single poet only.

2. **Cotton Vitellius or *Beowulf* Manuscript:** It was collected by Sir Robert Cotton. It was given to the British Museum, London where one can still find the charred edges of its leaves. In 1709 it was recorded as being in Sir Robert Cotton's library. Twenty six years later a fire broke out in the library and fortunately the *Beowulf* manuscript escaped. The manuscript contained another poem called *Waldhere*. It was as long as *Beowulf* but only two fragments were found in 1860 in the binding of a book in the Royal Library at Copenhagen.

3. **The Exeter Book:** It was given to Exeter Cathedral by Bishop Leofric sometime after 1050. But it was not well-known until 1826. It contains *Christ*, *Juliana*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Widsith*, *Deor* and many riddles and short poems. *Christ* and *Juliana* are signed poems of Cynewulf. It is notable that Cynewulf is the only Anglo-Saxon poet who signed some of his poems.

4. **The Vercelli Book:** It is now preserved in the Cathedral library of Vercelli in northern Italy. It was discovered in 1832. It contains *Andreas*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Address of the Soul to the Body*, *The Dream of the Rood*, and *Elene*. *The Fates of the Apostles* and *Elene* were signed by Cynewulf. *The Dream of the Rood* is thought to have been written by Cynewulf but it is not signed.

5. **Other Manuscripts:** *The Battle of Finnsburh* was found in a manuscript preserved in Lumbeth Palace Library; but it is now lost. The manuscript containing *Waldhere* was preserved in the Royal Library, Copenhagen but it was destroyed by neglect. *The Battle of Brunanburh* is found in a manuscript preserved in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. *The Battle of Maldon* was found in a manuscript which was destroyed in 1731 in the fire at Ashburnham House, Westminster. Another manuscript preserved in Corpus Christi College

contains *Judgment Day-ij*. A manuscript found in British Library, London contains the poem *For Unfruitful Land*. (591 words)

Middle Eng. romances link:

<https://archive.org/stream/aquidetomiddlee00billgooq#page/n20/mode/2up>

Anglo-Saxon Religious/ Christian Poems/ Poets

The two Anglo-Saxon religious poets Caedmon and Cynewulf were the products of Christianity. Bede says, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, that Caedmon got divinely inspired and wrote poems on biblical themes, namely 'Genesis', 'Exodus', 'Daniel', and 'Christ and Satan' which are preserved in the Junius Manuscripts. 'Genesis' is divided into two parts: 'Genesis-A' and 'Genesis-B'.

Caedmon (flourished 658–680), was the first Old English Christian poet, whose fragmentary hymn to the creation remains a symbol of the adaptation of the aristocratic-heroic Anglo-Saxon verse tradition to the expression of Christian themes. His story is known from Bede's book that he was an illiterate herdsman, retired from company one night in shame because he could not comply with the demand for singing. It is believed that Caedmon was divinely inspired and, to test his powers, the angel proposed that he should render into verse a portion of sacred history, which the monks explained. By the following morning he had fulfilled the task. At the request of the abbess he became an inmate of the monastery. Throughout the remainder of his life his more learned brethren expounded Scripture to him, and all that he heard he reproduced in vernacular poetry. All of his poetry was on sacred themes, and its unvarying aim was to turn men from sin to righteousness. In spite of all the poetic renderings that Caedmon supposedly made, however, it is only the original dream hymn of nine historically precious, but poetically uninspired lines that can be attributed to him with confidence. The hymn—extant in 17 manuscripts, some in the poet's Northumbrian dialect, some in other Old English dialects—set the pattern for almost the whole art of Anglo-Saxon verse.

Regarding Caedmon's authorship some critics say that the four poems were written not by only Caedmon. We must notice that Caedmon, like the scop was unable to read or write and the stories which he transmuted into poetry were entirely learnt by the word of mouth. Caedmon's source is not certain. We do not know of any particular source other than the divine inspiration and Christian tradition. Caedmon brought to the theme and characterization of the poems a bit variation. The Satan in his poem, 'Christ and Satan' is not an indomitable leader but a leader broken by defeat, who must swallow the curses of his own misdeeds. The fates of Satan and his followers serve the supreme object lesson for the mankind. In Caedmon's poetry we do not find any especial passage full of personal thoughts. Rather he treated the whole theme in a personal and didactic style. Caedmon, because of his illiteracy, could not divide the poems into fits. Later on the scribes divided them. Caedmon collected his raw materials entirely from biblical subject matters, the events celebrated in the Charles' calendar. In his poems the poetic beauty, lyric fervour and narrative vigour are absent. Caedmon composed the poems primarily in order to preach a moral lesson.

Cynewulf (flourished 9th century) was author of four Old English poems preserved in late 10th-century manuscripts. An epilogue to each poem contains runic characters representing the letters c, y, n, (e), w, u, l, f, which are thought to spell his name. A rhymed passage in the 'Elene' shows that Cynewulf wrote in the Northumbrian or Mercian dialect. Nothing is known of him outside his poems, as there is no reason to identify him with any of the recorded persons bearing this common name. He may have been a learned cleric since all of the poems are based on Latin sources. Although the poems do not have great power or

originality, they are more than mere paraphrases. Imagery from everyday Old English life and from the Germanic epic tradition enlivens the descriptions of battles and sea voyages. At the same time, the poet, a careful and skillful craftsman, consciously applies the principles of Latin rhetoric to achieve a clarity and orderly narrative progress that is quite unlike the confusion and circumlocution of the native English style.

The poems supposed to have been written by Cynewulf are 'Christ', 'Elene', 'Juliana', 'The Fates of the Apostles', 'The Falls of Angels', 'The Dream of the Rood', 'The Phoenix' and 'Judith'. It may be mentioned here that Cynewulf is the only Anglo-Saxon poet who signed some of his poems. The signatures were woven in the verses towards the end but not at the very end of a given poem. So Cynewulf's authorship is certain. His poems were written in order to chant them as religious prayers. Cynewulf began directly with the paraphrases of the biblical stories and with the deeds of the saints. He did not alter much of the biblical themes but he inserted personal thoughts into the poem like 'The Fates of the Apostles' in which the personal part takes more than one fourth of the whole. The poem reveals the poet's good craftsmanship. Cynewulf's poetic skill is praiseworthy also because he divided his poems into fits. The artistic skill with which he treated his theme is undoubtedly praiseworthy. Cynewulf placed with ideas and emotions the commonplace natural facts like sea, tempest and storm in his poems. Cynewulf's work is not confined within the barrier of biblical paraphrases and so his poetry appears to be devotional and mystical.

To sum up we may say that Caedmon's poems are more didactic than Cynewulf's and Cynewulf's poems are more artistic than Caedmon's.

Note: If you are asked to write the contribution of Caedmon only, write only first, second, third and the last paragraphs; if only Cynewulf write first, fourth, fifth and the last paragraphs; if you are asked to write on both Caedmon and Cynewulf, discard the second and fourth paragraphs, and write 1st, 3rd, fifth and the last paragraphs.

Anglo-Saxon Religious/ Christian Poems/ Poets (Comparative Study of Caedmon and Cynewulf)

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Caedmon collected his raw materials entirely from biblical subject matters, the events celebrated in the Charles' calendar. Cynewulf placed, with ideas and emotions, the commonplace natural facts like sea, tempest and storm in his poems. Cynewulf's work is not confined within the barrier of biblical paraphrases and so, his poetry appears to be devotional and mystical. But in Caedmon's poems the poetic beauty, lyric fervour and narrative vigour are absent. Caedmon composed the poems primarily in order to preach a moral lesson. So, it may be said that Caedmon's poems are more didactic than Cynewulf's and Cynewulf's poems are more artistic than Caedmon's. (532)

OLD ENGLISH ELEGIAC POEMS

The Anglo-Saxon manuscripts present before us a rich body of elegiac poems along with the heroic ones. *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Deor*, *The Wife's Lament*, *The Husband's Message*, *The Ruin*, *Wulf and Eadwacer* are notable elegiac poems of the Anglo-Saxon period. Life in all these poems is sorrowful, the speakers are fatalistic, though at the same time courageous and determined, as we find in the refrain to *Deor*:

"That grief passed away: so may this sorrow pass".

The Wanderer is classified as an elegy but it is not on anybody's death. The speaker here expresses his sorrow:

"Often I have had to bemoan my anxieties alone at each dawning./

There is now not one living being to whom I dare plainly express my heart".

The poem is the lament of a solitary man who was once happy in the service of a lord, but who now, long after his lord's death, has become a wanderer journeying the path of exile across the cold sea.

The Seafarer has the similar mood, the hardship, the fascination, the melancholy of the sea. He speaks of his experiences:

"How I have been suffered times of hardship in days of toil ...

My feet were pinched by the cold, shackled by the frost in cold chains, whilst anxieties sighed hot about my heart".

In The Wife's Lament a woman laments that she is banished from the sight of her beloved and forced to dwell in the woods. She reveals:

"What tribulations I have endured or of old since I grew up ... I have suffered perpetually the misery of my exile's paths". The poem ends with a moral:

"Woe is the one who must wait for love to come out of longing".

The Ruin is a lament over the ruin of a town where "There are tumbled roofs, towers in ruins, high towers rime frosted, rime on the limy mortar, storm-shielding tiling scarred, scored and collapsed, undermined by age." But once upon a time "There were bright city buildings, many bathhouses, a wealth of lofty gables, much clamour of the multitude, many a mead hall filled with human revelry". As the poet comes to visit the town he is solely touched by the picture of the ruin and the word 'ruin' recurs in the poem like a refrain.

The Husband's Message is a speech made by a stick of wood upon which a lover had cut a message to his lady. The stick explains how the man with his knife made it a messenger, and then addresses the lady directly in that capacity with mention of his journey to her from overseas and with many pleas on the lover's behalf.

Wulf and Eadwacer is a dramatic monologue, a lament of a woman of high sexual passion, who loves her outlawed lover Wulf and hates her husband Eadwacer with whom she is forced to live.

Deor's Lament is the first English poem with stanza division and refrain. Therefore, the small poem is important in the history of English literature. The poem is the personal lament of Deor as he says in the sixth stanza:

"The sorrowing anxious man sits, severed from prosperity, and grows dark in spirit: it seems to him that his share of miseries is without ending". But ultimately he is consoled.

To sum up we may unhesitatingly say that the elegiac mood intensely pervades the Old English poetry. If we remember Shelley's line "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought" we can of course claim that the Anglo-Saxon period is very much a rich one in the literary history of England. (601)

Old English Epics

The Old English literature which provides us with the most ample opportunities to look into their culture and beliefs is the heroic poetry. The heroic poetry, as the very name implies, reflects the picture of a heroic society. But the Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry is the mirror of both the pre-Christian heroic age and the Germanic civilization, as the invaders brought the stories from their continental homes. As a result the old English heroic poetry is pagan in origin and inspiration although they adopted the poetic forms later on, only in the seventh century. Literature is the mirror of society. So it is natural that we get some important information regarding the way of living in the heroic age.

The Old English poems on heroic subject matter may not have observed all the rules of heroic poems in the modern sense of the term but they are very close to the literary genre we regard to be perfect epic. The Anglo-Saxon poems regarded to be epics are Beowulf, Widsith, The Fight at Finnsburgh, Waldhere, The Battle of Maldon, The Battle of Brunanburgh and Andreas.

Beowulf is a poem of three thousand lines. The poem thus celebrates Beowulf's exploits of fighting a monster and later on a dragon. It reflects the ideas of that stage of society which we call the heroic age and it resembles that of the Odyssey. But Beowulf is not a perfect epic as Homeric epics. The hero is at last turned into a saint. This

breaks the epic convention. But the sustained epic dignity, grand style, uses of rhetoric e.g. alliteration, 'picture names' of things have brought the poem certainly epic grandeur.

In Widsith the travel of Widsith reminds us of that of Homeric Ulysses. The poem concludes as follows: *'Till all flits away/Life and light together-land who getteth so/Hath beneath the heaven high established power.'*

The Battle of Brunanburgh celebrates the victory of Athelstan of Wessex. There is an important difference between the heroic tone of this poem and that of the earlier Anglo-Saxon poetry. Unlike the older ones The Battle of Brunanburgh shows strong patriotic sentiments as if the victory of its hero is the victory of the English nation.

The Battle of Maldon has for its theme an actual battle fought in 99 at the estuary of the Black Water in Essex near Maldon. It deals with the battle in an epic manner. The hero of the poem is Byrhtnoth, Earl of Essex, leader of English militia. The poem is remarkably similar in spirit to the older heroic poetry.

The Fight at Finnsburgh found as a fragment of 50 lines, was composed probably by a scop. Only a fragment of it has survived: 46 lines and 2 half-lines. Finn, king of Frisians, marries Hilde Burgh, Hoc's daughter, the princess of the Jutes, to end a long standing hostility between the two nations. But when Hoc's son Hnaef comes with a company of Jutes as guests to Finnsburgh, the bitterness grows more powerful than the compact and the Jutes are attacked in their guest hall. Hnaef is killed and so is a son of Hilde Burgh's and Finn's union. But neither side prevails. At last Hilde Burgh loses her husband, brother and son. The fight lasted for five days. The poem is a war song described with Homeric power.

Waldhere is a fragment of only two leaves (32 & 31 lines) from which we get only a glimpse of the story of Waldhere (Walter of Aquitaine) and his betrothed bride Hildgund who were hostages at the court of Attila. They escaped with a great treasure but while crossing the mountain were attacked by Günter and his warriors among whom was Walter's former comrade, Hagen. Walter defeated them all and escaped. The versification of the poem was done in a style so broad and leisurely that they presumably made part of a long poem (one of 1000 lines or more, perhaps) in which was celebrated the fight between a hero and a band of warriors. The theme of the poem, like that of Beowulf is secular, the treatment involved and sophisticated, bookish rather than popular. Both the poems celebrate the events of the Germanic heroic age. The fragments are long enough to reveal that Waldhere lacks the greatness of Beowulf. Its clerical composers, however, had considerable skills in versification and though he used a Germanic source, he was steeped in traditional English poetry sacred and profane.

Andreas is a long poem divided into 15 books. It describes the story of St. Andrew who crosses the sea to rescue his comrade St. Matthew from the cannibals. The sailor of the boat turns out to be Christ in disguise. At last Matthew is set free. The poem is full of description of the sea which enriches the literary beauty therein. The poem ends with a choral song in praise of God, put in the mouth of the erstwhile cannibals. The verses of the poem make lively reading. They may lack polish but they have the vigour to spare. Like most old English religious poets, the author leans hard on heroic tradition for phraseology of poetic elaboration and for purple passage in general. The poem has an epic opening: "What! We have learned of the twelve under stars/in days of yore, heroes rich in glory, / thanes of the Lord."

Like Andreas, Elene (1321 lines) is also considered by Long to be an epic though the poem deals with religious themes. Elene has, for its subject matter, the finding of the true Cross. It tells of Constantine's vision of the Rood on the eve of battle. After his victory he sends his mother Helena (Elene) to Jerusalem in search of the original Cross and the nails. The nails are found and the poem ends with a passage on Dooms' day.

The modern lemon squeezing critics may find some characteristics in these poems, unfit for epic proper. Some of the poems may seem more lyrical than heroic. But we should keep in mind that at the very beginning no literary genre can achieve perfection. These epics, though have some limitations, are the foundation stones of perfect epics.

Alliterative Revival

The entire body of Old English poetry was written in the alliterative verses; each verse is divided into two parts by a strong caesura (stop) in the middle and each of these carries two stresses or accents and at least there must be three alliterative syllables in a verse. After the Norman Conquest under the French influence the rhymed gained an ascendancy although alliteration still remained in many phrases. English displaces French in schools and law courts and in 1362 parliament was opened in English language. This led to the revival of the alliterative verses and it continued in many of the romances till it reaches its climax in Langland's Pierce Plowman.

Some of the romances in alliterative verse are only in fragments, for example those on the story of Grail, Joseph of Arimathea and on Alexander. There is the romance on William and Werewolf preserved in a unique manuscript in the library of King's College, Cambridge. Its portrayal of tender and pathetic theme is masterly. The author offers an excuse for adopting the native alliterative verse because he has no skill in the handling of short couplets.

In a unique manuscript preserved in the British Museum there are four remarkable fine alliterative poems, namely 'Pear', 'Purity', 'Patience' and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. These are supposed to be the works of the same poet but nothing is known about him. He is cultured, experienced in the ways of the courts and of knightly breeding. The dates of the poem too are uncertain and today it is dated in the third quarter of the 14th century. The three poems are religious and the best of them is of course 'Pearl'. It is an allegory in which the author tells of a vision in which he seeks the pearl which he sees and which appears under the image of his own lost daughter (Margaret) and he obtains a glimpse of New Jerusalem (of heaven). There is a long discussion between the poet and the pearl (the allegorized daughter) who tells of the joy and honour in the heavenly kingdom. She solves his doubts and difficulties and finally he beholds her in the throng that gathers round the lamb in the New Jerusalem. His grief is gone and he submits to the divine will. The poem has highly alliterative lines with four accents in a very marked iambic rhyme. 'Purity' and 'Patience' are inferior works. The former is a collection of the biblical stories in which the author enforces the purity of life and submission to divine laws. 'Patience' is a more poetical paraphrase of the story of Jonah and the Gourd in the Bible. 'Sir Gawain and the green Knight' is a story par excellence. It throws a flood of light on the country of the age and so has a great historical value. The poet's deep and tender love of nature is displayed in the delightful passages that describe the scenes of nature. The handling of the plot is masterly. Monotony has been avoided with skill. In characterization, too, the poem is remarkable. The alliterative metre is deftly handled and is often combined with lyrical elements. Through these the poet achieves real heights in his poetry.

Piers Plowman is an impressive allegorical poem written in old alliterative metre in the later part of the 14th century. The author is traditionally taken to be William Langland. The poem is the greatest of all the alliterative poems of social protest. The poem has come down in three different texts. The A-text consists of a Prologue and eleven cantos. The B-text has twenty passus. The C-text is about of same length as the B-text and is divided into twenty three passus. Such repeated revisions of the poem are evidence of its continued popularity. In its earliest form the poem consists of three successive visions. Two of them are intimately connected and the third is rather incoherent. In the first vision the poet lies on the Malvern Hills on a May morning. He dreams a marvelous dream. He sees on the plain beneath him a multitude of folk a vast crowd expressing the varied life of the world. He sees a vision of a high

tower (truth), a deep dungeon (wrong). All classes and conditions of people—beggars, priests, lawyers, labourers, hermits and nuns assemble.

In another vision he sees Lady Meed, Reason, Conscience and other abstractions. In a confusion appears Lady Holy Church who exhorts them all to seek the best thing—truth. The next vision is about the Confession of the Seven Deadly Sins and a thousand of men moving to seek truth. But the way is difficult and here Piers Plowman makes his appearance and offers to guide the pilgrims if they help him plough his half acre of land. Piers sets them all to honest labour and preaches the gospel of work as preparation for salvation. At the end of the poem there is a vain search for do well, do-better and do best. The gentle movement of the traditional variety of love vision, generally told in rhymed couplets, has here given way to the more vigorous rhythms of the older alliterative rhymes. There is a rapid and bustling quality about the verse, a sense of men at work that is not easily paralleled in the medieval English literature. Piers Plowman is the work of a religious idealist who is genuinely distressed by the social and moral condition of England. The handling of the alliterative lines is always easy and confident. (922 words)

Contribution of LANGLAND to Middle English Literature.

Geoffrey Chaucer was no doubt the chief literary exponent of his age. But beside Chaucer we find two other literary figures in the domain of medieval English literature. They are Langland and Gower.

Langland is believed to be the author of the Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman or simply Piers Plowman, a series of allegorical poems. But we know nothing of the author except what the poem has to tell us. The poem is a personal revelation of the poet; but it is surprising that the poet has not completely concealed his identity. We know the name of Langland from two manuscripts, Ashburnham and another preserved in Trinity College, Dublin. A.C. Baugh admits the multi-authorship of the poem whose major portion was written by Langland.

The poem is a dream vision consisting of three texts: A-text (2579 lines) consisting of eleven cantos or passage, B-text (7241 lines), a continuation of the A-text, and C-text (7353 lines). As the poem opens, the author dressed as a hermit wandering one May morning on Malvern Hills, fell asleep and had a dream of a "field full of folk" some ploughing, some wearing fine clothes, businessmen, beggars, pilgrims, hermits, friars, bishops and tradesmen. He also saw a lady named 'Holy' who advised him. In the second dream the poet had the vision of Seven Deadly Sins and returned to the "field full of folk" whom Conscience was about to preach a sermon. Thus, the poet had dream visions one after one.

Dowel, Dobet and Dobest which the dreamer searches for, are nothing but the various stages in a good Christian's life. After a vision of the Crucifixion and the harrowing of Hell, the dreamer saw the establishment of the church and returned to the 14th century with an ultimate realization that the search must begin again.

The poet used in his poem complex, unconventional and even confusing allegories. Its various modes include the personification of abstract ideas, fully developed narrative episodes, example etc. The poem has a structure of biblical reference and exegesis. Apart from the poem's allegorical contents, it provides us an ample opportunity to have a detailed record of the late 14th century English political, theological and religious life. The poet satirizes the corrupt religious practice especially of the friars. So Langland's attitude was primarily not of a poet but of a reformer.

Langland's reformative attitude is once again evident in his other poem "Richard the Redeless" now known as "Mum and the Sothsegger". The poem offers belated advice to King Richard -ii after he had been taken prisoner (September -1399). It criticizes him for surrounding himself with inexperienced advisors who jeopardized him.

As already mentioned, Chaucer was the most brilliant literary figure in the M.E. period; he wrote a healthy volume of poems. But it would not be an attempt to belittle

Chaucer to say that we find some qualities in Langland, which we do not find in Chaucer. Langland did not try to make his name memorable, rather he had concealed his name carefully, probably because he wanted to reform the society, just like a religious reformer. Secondly in Langland the crowd swarms as in a market place, a contrast to Chaucer's peaceful picture of his pilgrims. The people are not like the people of high status as in "The Canterbury Tales". Langland selected a ploughman as the hero of his poem and this selection makes him appear as a rebel against social inequality. Langland satirized the corrupt people but his satire is accompanied by a deep religious fervour. We do not find this quality in Chaucer. Another quality in Langland is his use of rhetoric. The present piece is one of the best products of the M.E. alliterative revival: "In a somere seyson when softe was the sonne y shop me into shrobbis as y a shapperde were."(C-Text).

The advantage of scansion by stress rather than by mechanical counting of syllables is obvious here. His metre was the natural setting of a living language. These qualities are not so abundantly found in Chaucer. So, Boris Ford rightly comments: "In its way this is an achievement not less remarkable than that which enabled Chaucer to turn the highly organized stanza of Troilus and Criseyde to the ends of conveying the flow of natural dialogue and a keen presentation of Chaucer".

As already mentioned 'Piers Plowman' is an allegorical poem. Here the Ploughman is not merely a representative of the 14th century farmers. He is at first the Good Samaritan, the embodiment of Christian virtue of charity and secondly a symbol of humanity assumed by Christ in his incarnation, dying on the Cross, harrowing hell, and rising again to become the key to the destiny of all human race. So judged both from the thematic and rhetorical point of view 'Piers Plowman' is a master piece of M.E literature. In this long poem we do not find Chaucer's relish of human scene as human scene; it is the work of a religious idealist who is endeavouring to create a large and cumulative view of the wrong which needs improvement.

To sum up, we may quote David Daiches: "like Chaucer, the author of Piers Ploughman made use of traditional materials, and they both draw on the facts of contemporary society"; but what different pictures they present. The difference is one of attitude, both personal and social, and it is a salutary check to hasty generation about the spirit of an age to consider that the same age produced 'Piers Plowman' and The Canterbury Tales.

Modernity of Chaucer

Chaucer is regarded as the father of English poetry and the earliest of the great modernists. He anticipated the modern taste and the modern mind and in his poetry, he introduces qualities of the advanced age.

Chaucer has enlarged the scope and range of the poetry and has observed life minutely around him. He has not only made narration on art but also has given a new shape to language and versification. All these qualities make Chaucer a modern poet and his poetry immortal and evergreen. The main qualities, which make Chaucer a modern poet, are as numerated:

NATIONALISM: Chaucer voiced through his poetry the nationalism and unity which had been brought about by the fusion of the Normans and the Anglo-Saxons. The growing influences of France was checked and for the first time a poet in the national language of England gave expression to the life, ideals and aspiration of the people of the fourteenth century.

Realism: Modern poetry is characterized by realism. The note of realism was sounded by Chaucer long ago in the fourteenth century. He is gifted with unusual and keen observation and his penetrating eye spares nothing hidden.

SOCIETAL PICTURE: Chaucer's best descriptions of men, manners and places are of the first rank in their beauty, impressiveness and humour. His power of describing his fellowmen with all their merits and demerits, their tastes and temperaments is unique and "The Prologue

to the Canterbury Tales", is a picture gallery bringing in its scope all the classes of people ranging from the Knight to The Miller and The Cook.

STORYTELLING: Chaucer is a supreme storyteller in verse and he has made a notable contribution to the art of storytelling. In his stories, the narration, in spite of many digression and philosophical reflections, is straightforward as well as unhampered.

CHARACTERIZATION: Chaucer has made significant contribution to the art of characterization and he presents characters in a masterly manner. His characters are both individuals as well as types. They are timeless creation on a time-determined stage. The Knight, The Friar, The Pardoner, The Wife of Bath and The Doctor of Physic, all are living characters and have an external freshness about them.

HUMOUR: Chaucer's humour is invigorating and delightful. His genial humour cuts across the barriers of time, customs, language and idiom and refreshes and exhilarates us.

FRESHNESS: An especially charming feature of his poetry is its freshness and out-of-doors atmosphere. This quality makes him not only a modern poet but also his poetry universal.

FEATURES OF DRAMA & NOVEL: The elements of drama and novel are a part and parcel of Chaucer's writings. The wonderful style of characterization, dialogues and story not only gives a dramatic shape to his writings but also give them an ever-lasting life. On the other hand, the tales with their atmosphere are also novels in miniature and The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales is the prologue to the modern age.

VERSIFICATION: Chaucer made notable contribution to English language and versification. In 1360 English was split in four dialects. Chaucer popularized and reshaped the east Midland dialect and gave it the form of standard language.

In the light of the above discussion we can conclude that Chaucer was a genius born at a time when lights were hazy. By the alembic of his genius, he created something of lasting and permanent value in literature. (560)

CONTRIBUTION OF CHAUCER/ THREE PERIODS IN CHAUCER'S LITERARY CAREER

Geoffrey Chaucer is regarded as the father of English poetry and the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages. He was recognized in his life time and remained extremely influential throughout the 15th century. The literary historians and critics have divided Chaucer's literary career into three distinct periods which may not be accepted by all but it is generally adopted for the convenience of discussion:

- i) The French Period,
- ii) The Italian Period and
- iii) The English Period.

i) THE FRENCH PERIOD: Chaucer was greatly influenced by the French authors and so, the poems belonging to this period are modeled upon the French poetry and they are mostly the translations from the French poems. The list of such poems includes The Romaunt of the Rose, based on Roman de la Rose, a French poem by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun; the Book of the Duchess, an elegy on the death of the Duchess who was the wife of John of Gaunt, Chaucer's patron. The poem is greatly indebted to Machaut, Froissart, Ovid and other poets.

ii) The Italian Period (1379-85/86): Chaucer had been in Italy on a diplomatic mission and so, he had an opportunity to meet Petrarch, Boccaccio and probably Dante who greatly influenced him; but the deepest influence obviously came from Boccaccio as we find in his Troilus and Criseyde influenced by Boccaccio's Il Filostrato. Other notable poems of this period are The House of Fame, The Parliament of Fowls and The Legend of Good Women. The House of Fame is an unfinished poem in octosyllabic couplets, written between 1374 and 1385. The

Legend of Good Women is also an unfinished palinode immediately preceding The Canterbury Tales and making the earliest known use of heroic couplet in English. The Parliament of Fowls is based on the occasion of St. Valentine's Day when the birds gather and choose their mates. Another notable work of Chaucer in this period is his translation, the Consolation of Philosophy from Boethius.

iii) The English Period: This is the last and perhaps the most significant period of Chaucer's fruition. His best work The Canterbury Tales (1387-92) and his prose work A Treatise on the Astrolabe (1391-92) were written in this period. The Canterbury Tales is an unfinished collection of tales told in the course of a pilgrimage to Becket's shrine at Canterbury. A general Prologue briefly describes the 30 pilgrims and introduces the framework: each pilgrim was to tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back. There follow 24 tales including two told by Chaucer himself (Sir Thopas and The Tale of Melibee). Some tales were apparently intended for the narrators other than the ones who tell them in the text we have now.

To sum up we may say that though Chaucer had begun his literary career by following the French and the Italian models and getting influenced from the foreign poets, towards the end of his career he achieved his sheer originality and as a result we get the literary jewel like The Canterbury Tales. (512).

Do you consider Beowulf as an epic? Why do you think so?

Beowulf is the oldest English poem and chief literary monument of the Anglo-Saxon period. For the theme of the poem the poet turned to the heroic age of the Germanic people, to the heroes of the fifth and sixth centuries. The poem celebrates the fight of Beowulf with Grendel, a man-eating monster who used to regularly come to King Hrothgar's great hall Heorot, and Grendel's mother, in the first part, and another fight of Beowulf with a dragon, in the second part. The poem ends with the funeral of Beowulf.

NON-EPIC ELEMENTS: In Beowulf there are many non-epic elements like historical elements seen through the folk memory and folk imagination, in combination with a variety of marvelous legends. Moreover, the supernatural incidents, the adventures with the demons and dragons bring the poem nearer to nursery tales than to epic proper. In Beowulf there is no epic unity and so the technique is not perfect. The hero is turned into a saint; this breaks the epic convention. As a matter of fact Beowulf has more similarity with chivalric romances than with serious epics.

EPIC CHARACTERISTICS: But like an epic Beowulf deals with the exploits of Beowulf on whose action depend the fate of the Danes at first, and later on, of the Geats. It, like an epic, uses concrete phrases, figurative language, picture-names for things e.g. "Swan's Road" for sea, "Bone House" for body, "To Prepare the Murder Bed" for to kill, "Sea Wood" for ship etc. The grave courtesy with which men of ranks are received and dismissed, the generosity of rulers and the loyalty of retainers, the thirst for fame through the deeds of courage and endurance, the solemn boasting of warriors, the interest in genealogies and pride in a noble heredity— all these epic qualities are present in the poem. The poem is an impressive performance, carrying us successfully into the Anglo-Saxon heroic imagination, with its emphasis on solemn courtesy, generosity, fidelity and sheer endurance. The poet, in glorifying his hero, has also glorified the heathen Germanic country culture and has given us a spiritualized picture of the Germanic heroic age. Probably the poet of Beowulf knew the Aeneid and was influenced by it. But in celebrating a secular hero the poet certainly showed originality, especially in portraying his characters with simplicity and directness in spite of grandeur, its dignified and elaborate style and breadth of vision, vigorous speeches, polished description especially of the wild scenes.

CONTROVERSY: Regarding the question, whether Beowulf should be categorized as an epic or non-epic, there is, as usual, a tug of war between two critical groups with marginal winning points for the "Epic Group".

Beowulf is not obviously a perfect epic in the sense the Iliad and the Odyssey are. It has neither the larger epic conception of the Odyssey nor the fine polish of a 'secondary' epic such as the Aeneid. But the above mentioned qualities have certainly brought the poem to the epic category.

CONCLUSION: To sum up we may say that Beowulf may not be one of the half-dozen great epic poems of the world but for sheer style it has certainly come very close to them.
(528)