



A Brief History & Selected Readings of
English and American Literature

英美文学简史 及名篇选读

主 编 田祥斌 朱甫道

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外语教学与研究出版社
FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH PRESS

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编 者 冯军霞 高 倩

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前言

英美文学是我国高等学校本科英语专业的一门必修课程。学生既可以从文学发展中了解英美的社会文化，还可以通过阅读经典英语文学作品增强语言运用能力和思辨能力。英美文学以英语语言文字为工具，形象化地反映出不同时代的客观现实和意识形态；文学是表现和诠释人之心灵的艺术，是文化的一种美学表现形式，包括小说、诗歌、戏剧和散文。

本教材融英美文学史及经典阅读为一体，旨在让英语专业的学生对英美文学的起源和发展有较全面的了解，能汲取英美文化中的精髓。还能在欣赏文学精品的阅读过程中，学习地道的英语，感受语言文字的魅力。《英美文学简史及名篇选读》严格按照教育部《高等学校英语专业教学大纲》的要求编写。教材以文学史为主线，简明扼要地介绍文学发展史和重点作家作品，精选经典作品或片段选读，以便学生从文学中获取宽广的知识面，在作品阅读中提升英语语言理解能力；用英美文学精品培育学生，提高大学生的道德、文化、心理等素质。

教材包括背景介绍、重点作家作品概览、名篇选读、注释、文本思考题、章节练习等。背景介绍中包括主要文学思潮、文学运动、代表作家、文学术语等，时间跨度从英国的中古文学和美国的独立时期到21世纪。名篇选读包括经典的小说节选、诗歌、戏剧节选、短篇小说、散文，以提高学生分析不同体裁文学的能力和提升写作能力。

本教材适合高等学校英语专业学生使用。编写过程中，文学发展主线梳理和文学理论的阐释参考了网络及前人的专著或教材，也汲取了国内外英美文学研究的近期成果，在此向这些编著者表示衷心的感谢。第一、二、三、六、八、九章由田祥斌编写；第五、七章由冯军霞编写；第四、十一章由高倩编写；第十章由赵格亚编写；第十二章由刘蕾编写。田祥斌统稿，朱甫道审稿，冯军霞负责校对。编者力求重点突出、语言通俗易懂、篇幅短而精。若有不足，恳请指正。

编者
2017年7月

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PART I

ENGLISH LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

English Literature in the Old and Middle Ages

(449-1485)

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Old English literature, or Anglo-Saxon literature, began in the period after the settlement of the Teutonic tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes about 449 AD and ended after the Norman Conquest in 1066. The Angles settled in the central part of the island, calling their new home Angle-land, then shortened into England. The greatest Old English poem is *Beowulf*.

Beowulf

Beowulf is the greatest and first English epic. It belongs to the seventh century which tells us a story of a brave young man, Beowulf, who is from southern Sweden to help Hrothgar, King of the Danes. The poem consists of 3182 lines and the author is unknown. *Beowulf* is a valuable narrative poem, which records the valuable custom of that time and gives us an interesting picture of life in those old days. The epic tells us of fierce fights and brave deeds of the leader and the sufferings of his men. It is mainly about Beowulf's three major adventures and praises the bravery, keeping promise, and loyalty.

Hrothgar is in trouble because his great hall, called Heorot, is visited at night by the terrible monster Grendel, which lives in a lake and comes to kill and devours many of Hrothgar's warriors while they sleep. Beowulf leaves his homeland with his king's permission to help Hrothgar. One night, Beowulf waits secretly for the monster in the hall and attacks it. Beowulf pulls Grendel's arm off with his bare hands. Grendel runs to his home and slowly dies.

The Grendel's mother comes to the hall in revenge for Grendel's defeat. Beowulf attacks her and follows her to the bottom of the lake. There he kills Grendel's mother. He returns to Heorot, where Hrothgar gives Beowulf many gifts.

Later in his life, Beowulf is the king of his people. In order to defend his country against a fire-breathing creature, Beowulf and his warriors come to fight the creature. Although he kills the animal, Beowulf is badly wounded and dies. The poem ends with a sorrowful description of Beowulf's funeral fire.

The original poem written in old language is not easy to read, but *Beowulf* has its own value. The poem is of no rhyme. Instead, each half-line is joined to the other by alliteration. Alliteration is the repetitions of the same consonant sounds in a line, especially at the beginning of words. Here are two lines of it.

Of men he was the mildest and most beloved,
To his kin the kindest, keenest to praise.

Another feature is the use of a lot of metaphors and understatements in the poem in which things are described indirectly and in combinations of words. A ship is not only a ship. It is a sea-goer, a sea-boat, a sea-wood, or a wave-floater.

Epic is a long narrative poem that records the adventures of a hero, whose exploits are important to the history of a nation.

Middle English literature, or Medieval English Literature, refers to the literature written from about 1066 to about 1500. The Norman conquest of England began with the battle of Hastings in 1066 when the Normans headed by Duke William I of Normandy defeated the Anglo-Saxons. The Norman Conquest marked the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.

After the Norman Conquest, three languages co-existed in England. French became the official language used by the king and Norman lords; Latin became the principal tongue of church affairs and in universities. And Old English was spoken only by the common English people.

The greatest poet of the time was Geoffrey Chaucer who is often called the father of English poetry. As we know, the language had changed a great deal in the seven hundred years since the time of *Beowulf* and it is much easier to read Chaucer than to read anything written in Old English.

In the medieval period, the prevailing literary form was the romance. **Romance** was a long composition, sometimes in verse, sometimes in prose, describing the life and adventures of a noble hero. The central character of romances was the knight, a man of noble birth skilled in the use of weapons. The knight was commonly described as riding forth to seek adventures, or fighting for his lord in battle. He was devoted to the church and the king.

The subjects of English romances mainly deal with three types of

historical material: the matter of Rome and Greece, the matter of France, and the matter of Britain which refers to Arthurian stories. The famous romance is adventures of *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*. One of the main subjects is the search for The Holy Grail. Another subject is Arthur's battles against his enemies, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* which is one of the very popular stories.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

The poem's author is anonymous. Sir Gawain is the King Arthur's nephew, one of the Knights of the Round Table. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the most accomplished example of medieval romance and a poem of rich psychological and moral interest. It tells of the adventures of one of King Arthur's Knights in a struggle against an enemy with magic powers as well as great strength and cunning. Sir Gawain finishes the adventure with all honors.

In the first canto, Green Knight challenges the bravest knight and Gawain accepts the challenge. He takes the battle ax to cut off the Green Knight's head. In the second canto, Gawain keeps his promise to look for the Green Chapel and lives in the castle near the chapel. The third canto shows the life of Gawain spent in the castle to get three kisses and the girdle within three days. In the fourth canto, Gawain is brought to the Green Chapel. The Green Knight wounds him because he conceals the green girdle.

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400)

INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Chaucer, known as the father of English literature, is widely considered the greatest poet of the Middle Ages. He is regarded as the first realist in English literature because he gives us the ordinary daily life of the 14th century. It is Chaucer alone who, for the first time in English literature, presented to us a comprehensive realistic picture of the English society of his time and created a whole gallery of vivid characters from all walks of life in his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*.



Chaucer is often called the father of English poetry. His contribution to English poetry lies chiefly in the fact that he introduced from France the rhymed stanzas of various types to English poetry instead of the old alliterative verse, especially **heroic couplet**, a verse form with iambic pentameter, which rhymes in pairs or couplets.

As a first realistic writer, Chaucer is considered as the founder of English realism because he shows us the realistic pictures of 14th-century English society in his *The Canterbury Tales*.

As a forerunner of humanism, Chaucer praises man's energy, intellect, quick wit and love of life. His tales expose and satirize the evils of the time.

His language is vivid and exact. Chaucer is the first great poet who wrote in the current English language. He did much in making the dialect of London the foundation for modern English speech. Chaucer is recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the first author to use many common English words in his writings. So we can say he is the master of the English language.

Chaucer was born about 1340 in London. He was the son of a well-to-do wine merchant who had connections with the Court. The poet is said to have studied at Cambridge and Oxford. His learning was wide in scope. He obtained a good knowledge of Latin, French and Italian. In 1359, in the early stages of the Hundred Years' War, Chaucer went to France and he was captured in 1360. Edward III paid £16 for his ransom and Chaucer was released. After his return, he married Philippa, a lady-in-waiting to Edward III's queen. Several times he was sent to the Continent on diplomatic missions, two of which took him to Italy. Then he was appointed Controller of customs at London. He died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey in

London. Chaucer is the first writer who was interred in the area now known as “Poets’ Corner”.

Chaucer went Italy twice and was influenced by Italian Renaissance, especially by Dante and Boccaccio. His major works include *The Book of the Duchess* (1370), *The Parliament of Fowls* (1380), *The House of Fame* (1374-1384), *Troilus and Criseyde* (1385), *The Legend of Good Women* (1385), and his masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*.

SELECTED READING

The Canterbury Tales

Overview

The *Canterbury Tales* is a framed story which is called one of the monumental works in English literature. The plan of this narrative poem shows the evident influence of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. According to Chaucer’s plan, he will tell us over 120 tales, more than the number of *Decameron*, but he has only finished *General Prologue* and 24 tales, of which four are incomplete. However, *The Canterbury Tales* shows us the real society of the fourteenth-century England. The gallery of portraits in the *General Prologue* covers almost the whole range of fourteenth-century occupations and professions. And the tales deal with important social and domestic issues. The poem as a whole gives a vivid and comprehensive picture of the social conditions of the 14th century England.

Chaucer meets a party of twenty-nine other pilgrims at the Tabard Inn on their way to Canterbury. He joins the company to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket. At the suggestion of the host of the inn, the pilgrims agree to tell stories to pass the time on their journey on horseback from London to Canterbury. Each of them will tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. The best story-teller shall be treated with a fine supper at general expense at the end. The host is to be the judge of the contest.

In the famous *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer describes the pilgrims for us in great detail, from which we get to know the pilgrims themselves. Most of them, such as the merchant, the lawyer, the cook, the sailor, the plowman, and the miller, are ordinary people, but each of them can be recognized as a real person with his or her own character. One of the most enjoyable characters is the Wife of Bath. She tells her story to manage her five husbands strictly.

The selection is from the *General Prologue* which provides a framework

for the tales. The poet begins his poem with a flowery description of the English countryside in the spring time. All the birds are prodded into participation in the processes of nature and sing all the night through. Then people have been stirred by the beautiful nature to go off on pilgrimages. The description of the rain, the west wind, the sun, the birds and human beings gives us beautiful and harmonious scenery in April.

General Prologue

(Excerpt)

As soon as April pierces to the root
 The drought of March, and bathes each bud and shoot
 Through every vein of sap with gentle showers
 From whose engendering liquor spring the flowers;
 When Zephyrus¹ have breathed softly all about
 Inspiring every wood and field to sprout,
 And in the zodiac² the youthful sun
 His journey halfway through the Ram³ has run;
 When little birds are busy with their song
 Who sleep with open eyes the whole night long
 Life stirs their hearts and tingles in them so,
 Then off as pilgrims people long to go,
 And palmers⁴ to set out for distant strands
 And foreign shrines renowned in many lands.
 And specially in England people ride
 To Canterbury from every countryside

1 Zephyrus: the west wind

2 Zodiac: an area of the sky through which the sun, moon and most of the planets appear to move, or the representation of this area in the form of a usually circular drawing. The area of sky is divided into twelve equal parts, each of which has a name, is connected with a time of year, and is represented by a symbol.

3 Ram: Ram is one of the signs of the Zodiac. The sun is supposed to run through the sign of the Ram annually from March 21st to April 21st, so the sun is young.

4 palmers: pilgrims to foreign countries