

*An Introduction to English
and American Literature Analysis
and Discussion*

英美文学概况及选读

主编 崔雅萍

西北大学出版社
NORTHWEST UNIVERSITY PRESS

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英 美 文 学 概 况 及 选 读

*An Introduction to English
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ISBN 978-7-5604-2387-6



9 787560 423876 >

定价：49.00元

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ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

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徐 婧 肖志宏 咸利娟 陈 蕾
张 莉 朱 帅 苗园园 康 卉

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

英美文学概况及选读 / 崔雅萍主编. — 西安: 西北大学出版社, 2007.9

ISBN 978-7-5604-2387-6

I. 英… II. 崔… III. ①文学研究—英国 ②文学研究—美国 IV. I106

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2007)第152722号

英美文学概况及选读

作者: 崔雅萍 主编

出版发行: 西北大学出版社

地址: 西安市太白北路229号

邮编: 710069

电话: 029-88302590

经销: 全国新华书店

印装: 陕西向阳印务有限公司

开本: 787毫米×1092毫米 1/16

印张: 33.75

字数: 832千

版次: 2007年9月第1版 2007年9月第1次印刷

书号: ISBN 978-7-5604-2387-6

定价: 49.00元



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English Literature



CHAPTER 1

EARLY AND MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

I. Overview

England has a long history of civilization. From the recorded history we know that the land was occupied by the Celts before the Romans invaded it. The native Celtic Britons suffered repetitive invasions by foreign forces. In 55 or 54 B. C., Julius Caesar and his legions occupied England and the Celts were subjugated to the rule of Rome for nearly 400 years. The Romans, however, did not gain full control of Britain. Latin did not become the language of Britain and people continued to speak Celtic. In 410, the Romans abandoned the island. The Celts were left on their own to defend themselves. Three Germanic tribes soon invaded England; the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. This is the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period in British history (449-1100). The native Celts fought for their independence. Many of them were killed. The rest were either driven into Wales or became slaves. By 550, the Anglo-Saxons were firmly established. The English language became the dominant language in England. No matter how uncomfortable the native Celts felt about the invasions, these foreign elements played vital roles in the creation of English history and literature.

Anglo-Saxon became Old English, and the place became England, or the Angle-land, "the land of the Angles." In 597 A. D. the Anglo-Saxons began to be converted to Christianity. In the second half of the 7th century, the first English poet, Caedmon by name, began to sing. Another century passed and *Beowulf*, the first English poem, still intact as a whole piece today, was composed in Old English. In the 9th century King Alfred the Great defeated a new wave of invasion from Scandinavia. It was King Alfred who decided that literature should be written in the vernacular, or Old English. The Anglo-Saxon period was basically barren in literary creations. What have been left through the ravages of time are mostly fragments. These include both pagan and religious poems.

With the arrival of St. Augustine in 597 A. D. and the subsequent spread of Christian influence and classical learning, heathen poetry was slowly and steadily maneuvered out of the scene. There was a time of intermingling of the pagan with the Christian components in poetry such as *Beowulf*, but then the pagan was superseded by the religious spirit, and minstrels gave way to learned men. The religious poetry that took over was chiefly based on Biblical stories. Among the religious poets of the period one stood out with his captivating story of growth. This was Caedmon (610-680) from Northumbria (a center of Anglo-Saxon



literature), a monastery herdsman without any education, who could not even sing to the harp at feasts. One night he had a dream in which he heard voice from God: "Caedmon, Sing me something." Caedman answered that he could not sing. Then God told him "Sing me the Creation." Then all at once Caedmon could sing and became the first Anglo-Saxon poet and the first known poet in English literary history. A hundred years after Caedmon, Cynewulf of Northumbria came on the scene. This happened about the 8th century. He was the first English poet ever to sign his compositions. The poems generally attributed to his authorship include, among others, *The Legend of St. Elena*, and *Christ*.

Regarding the prose of the period, two works of any historical interest merit attention here. One was *The Ecclesiastical History of England* by the Venerable Bede (673-735), a monk who wrote in Latin and this work earned for him the title of "Father of English History". The book covers the whole length of early English history from the invasion by Julius Caesar to the year 731, four years before the author's death. The book is full of strange religious stories and miracles. It was Bede who told about the story of Caedmon. And the other was *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, founded by King Alfred the Great (848-901), the earliest of its kind in Europe, which was continued after his death up to the early twelfth century. It began with the story of Caesar's conquest and annually recorded important events until 1154.

In 1066, William the Conqueror and his Norman warriors defeated the Anglo-Saxons and made themselves masters of England, starting the medieval period in England (1066-1485). The Normans brought into the country from France, which was more culturally sophisticated, its language, culture, and political system and accelerated the development of feudalism in England. For three centuries after the Norman Conquest, three languages existed in England at that time. The Normans, the upper class, spoke French, the Anglo-Saxons, the lower class, spoke English, and the scholars and clergymen used Latin.

After the conquest, the body of customs and ideals known as chivalry was introduced by the Normans into England. The knightly code, the romantic interest in women, tenderness and reverence paid to Virgin Mary were reflected in the literature. Romance was a type of literature that was very popular in the Middle Ages. The great age of medieval romance was the 12th and early 13th centuries and its chief breeding ground was the aristocratic society in France. From France it was introduced into England in the second half of the 13th and the 14th centuries. Romance, in the original sense of the word, means the vernacular language, as opposed to Latin, and later it means a tale in verse, embodying the life and adventures of knights. Romance was characteristic of the early feudal age, as it reflected the spirit of chivalry, i. e., the quality and ideal of knightly conduct. The content of romance was usually about love, chivalry, and religion. It generally concerns knights and involves a large amount of fighting as well as a number of miscellaneous adventures; it makes liberal use of the improbable, often supernatural, and it often includes romantic love. In subject matters, romance naturally falls under three categories: (a) The matter of France; a number of romances deal with the exploits of Charlemagne the Great and Roland, a French national hero in the 8th century. The most well known piece is *Chanson de Roland*. (b) The matter of Rome: Some romances deal with Alexander the Great and the siege of Troy. (c) The matter of Britain: The Arthurian legend was brought to France by the Celts and the English people later took the material from the French tales. There are many cycles of Arthurian romances, among which are tales about Sir Gawain, Lancelot,



Merlin, the quest for the Holy Grail, and the death of King Arthur. The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the culmination of the Arthurian romances.

In the 14th century, England produced five main writers. The first one was William Langland, whose masterpiece was *Piers the Plowman*. He wrote about social discontent in his works and preached the equality of men and dignity of labor. Wycliffe, the second one, was the greatest of English religious reformers and the first translator of the *Bible*. Gower, the third one, was a scholar and a literary man, who criticized the social life in his works. The fourth one Mandeville was a traveler and wrote about the wonders he had seen abroad. Chaucer (1340-1400), the last one, was the greatest of them. He was the representative writer of the century. Therefore, the 14th century is usually called "Age of Chaucer". Chaucer and Langland were the most important writers of the age.

The 15th century was a period of general unrest. People's attention was absorbed in Wars, and many nobles who had been patrons of arts were killed. The continuous wars greatly affected the development of literature. So the 15th century has traditionally been described as the barren age in English Literature. Yet in this barren age, popular literature became very prosperous. There were ballads, lyrics, popular dramas and so on. The most important of English popular literature was popular ballads. So the 15th century became the especial spring tide of English ballads. There was only one important writer whose name is Thomas Malory (1395-1471). He wrote an important work called "*Morte d' Arthur*" (Death of Arthur). Its Arthurian materials have a strong influence on literature of later centuries.

1. The Influence of Norman Conquest upon English Language and Literature

After the conquest, feudal system was established in English society. Meantime, the customs and ideals known as chivalry were introduced into England by the Normans. The knightly code, the romantic interest in women, tenderness and reverence paid to Virgin Mary were reflected in the literature.

During the following three centuries since the conquest, the Anglo-Saxons' speech was made to be a despised thing. French words of warfare and chivalry, art and luxury, science and law, began to come into the English language. Thus three languages existed in England at that time. The Normans spoke French, the lower class spoke English, and the scholars and clergymen used Latin.

The literature which they brought to England is remarkable for its bright romantic tales of love and adventure, in marked contrast with the strength and somberness of Anglo-Saxon poetry. The literature was varied in interest and extensive in range. The Normans began to write histories or chronicles. Most of the books were written in Latin or French. The prevailing form of literature in that period was the Romance.

2. Features of *Beowulf*

(1) It is the oldest poem in the English language and the most important specimen of Anglo-Saxon literature. It is also the oldest surviving epic in the English language.

(2) It is not a Christian but a pagan poem. It is the product of all advanced pagan civilization at that time. The social conditions and customs can be seen in it, so the poem has a great social significance.

(3) The use of the strong stress and the predominance of consonants are very notable in this poem.

(4) The use of the alliteration is another notable feature.

(5) A lot of metaphors and understatements are used in the poem. For example, the sea is called



"the whale-road" or "the swan-road"; human body is referred to as "the bone-house".

II. Key Authors and Their Works

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400)

1. A Brief Introduction

Chaucer is acclaimed not only as "the father of English poetry", but also as "the father of English fiction". We are indebted to him for the most vivid contemporary description of fourteenth century England. Chaucer's contribution to English poetry is that he introduced the "heroic couplet" to English poetry, instead of the old Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse. The characters under his pen are always with both typical qualities and individual disposition. Although essentially still a medieval writer, Chaucer bore marks of humanism and anticipated a new era to come—Renaissance, whose main spirit can be always seen in Chaucer's works.

2. Chaucer's Major Works

The Canterbury Tales is regarded as one of the most famous works in all literatures. The whole work consists of a prologue and twenty-four tales. Twenty-two tales were written in verse form; two in prose form. The plan of the work is to represent the wide sweep of English life by gathering a mixed company together and letting each class of society tell its own favorite stories. This company is a group of pilgrims, who are going to Canterbury. All classes of the English feudal society, except for the royalty and the poorest peasant, are represented by these thirty pilgrims. In the work, Chaucer created a strikingly brilliant and picturesque panorama of his time and his country. In this poem, Chaucer's realism, trenchant irony and freedom of views reached such a high level of power that it had an equal in all the English literature up to the 16th century. Among the twenty-four tales, the best ones are tales of the Knight, the Pardoner, the Nun's Priest and the wife of Bath.

3. The Outline of *The Canterbury Tales*

The whole work consists of a prologue and twenty-four tales. In the prologue, the author reveals his plan for writing this work, and also vividly describes the teller of each tale. Chaucer tells us that one spring day, he meets some thirty pilgrims in an inn, who are going to Canterbury. He joins the company. At supper, the host of the inn suggests that in order to enliven the journey, each of the pilgrims is to tell two stories while going and returning. The best storyteller shall be treated with a fine supper at general expense when they come back. The host is to be the judge of the contest. The prologue comprises a group of vivid sketches of typical medieval figures. Every figure is drawn with the accuracy of a portrait. And the twenty-four tales, which the pilgrims tell, are well suited to the various characters.

4. Chaucer's Contribution to English Poetry

Chaucer's greatest contribution to English poetry is that he introduced from France the rhymed couplet of iambic pentameter to English poetry. Originally, Old English poems are mainly alliterative verses with few variations. Chaucer introduced the rhymed stanzas of various types to English poetry to replace it. In



The Romaunt of the Rose, he first introduced to English the octosyllabic couplet. In *The Legend of Good Women*, he used for the first time in English heroic couplet. And in his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, he employed heroic couplet with true ease and charm for the first time in the history of English literature.

Besides, Chaucer is the first great poet who wrote in the current English language. He wrote his poetry by using the dialect of London. So he did much in making the dialect of London, the foundation for modern English speech and establishing English as the literary language of the country. John Dryden called him "the father of English poetry".

5. Features of Chaucer's Writing

Chaucer wrote in vivid and exact language. His poetry is full of vigor and swiftness. He introduced the "heroic couplet" to English poetry and he is the first great poet who wrote in the current language by using the dialect of London.

Chaucer's style in *The Canterbury Tales* is remarkably flexible. His prose, like his vocabulary, is easy and informal. Chaucer is a great satirist, but he is almost never bitter when he pokes fun at the foibles and weaknesses of people.

In his works, he presented a comprehensive realistic picture of his age and created a whole gallery of vivid characters. He always developed his characterization to a higher level by presenting characters with both typical qualities and individual dispositions.

6. The Social Significance of *The Canterbury Tales*

In his greatest work, *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer gives us a strikingly brilliant and picturesque panorama of the society of his time. Taking the stand of the rising bourgeoisie, he affirms men and opposes the dogma of asceticism preached by the church. As a forerunner of humanism, he praises man's energy, intellect, quick wit and love of life. His tales expose and satirize the evils of his time. They attack the degeneration of the noble, the heartlessness of the judge, the corruption of the church and so on.

Living in a transitional period, Chaucer is not entirely devoid of medieval prejudices. He is religious himself. There is nothing revolutionary in his writing, though he lived in a period of peasant uprising. While praising man's right to earthly happiness, he sometimes likes to crack a rough joke and paint naturalistic pictures of sexual life. These are Chaucer's weak points. But these are, however, of secondary importance compared with his achievement as a great poet and story-teller.

7. A Brief Comment on Geoffrey Chaucer's Works

Geoffrey Chaucer is the greatest writer of the Middle Age in English history. His major works include *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Legend of Good Women* and so on. For the first time in English literature, he presented to us a comprehensive realistic picture of the English society of his time and created vivid characters from all works. Chaucer explores the theme of the individual's relation to the society in which he lives. He develops his characterization to a higher artistic level.

Chaucer introduced various rhymed stanzas to English poetry to replace the Old English alliterative verse. He first introduced into English octosyllabic couplet and the rhymed couplet of iambic pentameter which is to be called later the heroic couplet. And in *The Canterbury Tales*, he employed the heroic cou-



plet with true ease and charm for the first time in the art of literature. Chaucer also developed the art of literature itself beyond anything to be found in any other medieval literature. In *The Canterbury Tales*, he developed his art of poetry still further towards drama and the art of the novel.

Though entirely rooted in the soil of the Middle Ages, Chaucer's art is so fully realized as to carry him beyond his time and make him one of the greatest poets in English. John Dryden called Chaucer the "father of English poetry". Many later writers, including Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare, are indebted to him.

III. Terms

1. The Norman Conquest

The Norman was originally a group of sea wonderers living in Scandinavia, and then conquered Northern France and settled there. In 1066, William the Great, the Duke of Normandy, led the Norman army to invade England. Finally the English army was defeated and William became the King of England. After the conquest, feudal system was established in English society. To some extent, the Norman Conquest started the medieval period in English literature, which covers about four centuries.

2. Popular Ballads

Popular ballads are originally songs intended as the accompaniments to dances. They are little stories in verse form, which can be sung and recited by the common people. Usually they are anonymous, and are handed down orally for many generations. There were several kinds of ballads: historical, legendary, fantastical, lyrical and humorous. The English popular ballads flourished from the 12th century to the 15th century, reflecting the life of the people then. The most remarkable ones are the Robin Hood ballads, which are about an outlawed hero who lives in the forest with his men, robs the rich and helps the poor.

3. Epic

Epic is a long narrative poem celebrating the great deeds of one or more legendary heroes in a grand ceremonious style. The action is simple but full of magnificence. The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* is a primary epic, as is the oldest surviving epic poem. Nowadays the term has sometimes been extended to long romances, to ambitious historical novels and to some large-scale film productions on heroic or historical subjects.

4. Heroic Couplet

Heroic Couplet is a rhymed pair of iambic pentameter lines, with a heavy pause at the end of the first line and a still heavier one at the end of the second. There is always a parallel or an antithesis within a line, or between the two lines. It was introduced firstly by Chaucer as a major English verse form for narrative and other kinds of non-dramatic poetry. It dominated English poetry of the 18th century, notably in the closed couplets of Pope, before declining in importance in the early 19th century.