

● 高等学校特色专业建设项目系列教材

新编

英国文学简史

A NEW BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

李增◎主编 陈彦旭◎副主编

陕西师范大学出版总社有限公司  
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## 新编英国文学简史

李 增 主编

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# Preface

Since we accepted the task of composing *A New History of English Literature*, we have been thinking about where the “newness” lies. Before us, such a tremendous number of the books in this field have been written and edited that we feel very hard to add something completely new to the list. However, we are very reluctant to stick to the old path and we have to make our own contribution, either for the fulfillment of the aims promised in the application or for the spirit of innovation we must bear in mind when we practice academic research.

In pursuit of a breakthrough point, we find that the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida’s idea provides us with some inspirations. He asserts that “genre is the driving force of ... all literary history<sup>①</sup>”. Other critics like Stuart Curran and Tzvetan Todorov state the similar idea in various ways and they locate the literary originality in genre and put stress on the role of genre in pushing forward the progress of literature. With this belief in the mind we are going to reconsider the history of English literature in terms of genre evolution and trace the origins of some typical genres, define their features, represent their conventions and show their development.

However, what is genre, how are genres classified and why does genre so matter, are the questions we must answer before we deal with those individual genres in the history of English literature.

According to *The Oxford Companion to the Classical Literature*: “genre in literature is a class or type of literary work, such as epic, lyric, tragedy, or comedy.”<sup>②</sup> These four genres are first introduced in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In *Poetics*, Aristotle not only introduces the concept of genre but also proposes the ways of distinguishing genres by three respects—the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation.

Aristotle’s ideas of genre were strictly adhered by the classicists in the eighteenth century. In classical literature the genres were carefully distinguished from each other not only by subject matters but also by formal aspects such as dialect, vocabulary, and meter, and the conventions of each genre were strictly adhered to.

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<sup>①</sup>Derrida, Jacques. “The Law of Genre”, *Glyph* 7 (1980), p. 212.

<sup>②</sup>Howatson, Bym. C., ed. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1989. p. 248.



However, the complexity of literary development went much beyond what is defined by Aristotle and those classicists. When the society entered into the modern period, more genres came into existence and the appearance of subsequent subgenres made the picture more blurred and indistinct. At the same time, the discussions and debates concerning genre gradually abounded and deserved more attention. Finally, “genre has come to be one of the most compelling concepts in the whole of literary theory. It occupies a central position, beset with elusive issues.”<sup>①</sup> It seems that all issues have converged into a question: are there any universal criteria to classify genres?

From the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, various attempts were made by critics and scholars to define genres and classify them. The biological model proposed by the critics of the nineteenth century, Benedetto Croce's conceding of a bond among individual works, Chicago Aristotelians' approach of treating genre in a rhetorical way and their insistence on rigid genre boundaries between classes with defining characteristics, Northrop Frye's studies of the archetypal genres, the New Critics' attention to the “lyric” genre, structuralists' regarding of genres as definable classes and ignoring of its historical change, E. D. Hirsch's development of concepts of extrinsic and intrinsic genres, and Roman Ingarden's exposition of the stratified structures, are the representative efforts of different historical periods. However, it seems that all these contentions have ceased to quiet down when the ideas of the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein were being brought to bear on genre theory. Wittgenstein's contribution consists mainly in his idea of family resemblance.

Wittgenstein had shown that many groupings, such as games, are not hard-edged classes susceptible to rigid definition, but have a coherence which more resembles that of a family. Rather than defining characteristics, their members share family resemblances. By these a family is easily recognized; yet not all of them need to be exhibited by any single individual member. Once the concept of family resemblance was introduced, its further application enjoyed a wide popularity in the critical field. All subsequent genre theories and critical practice based on it have been fused with the Wittgensteinian insight. Classifying genres have no longer become a problem frustrating critics and scholars. In the development of genre understanding, Alastair Fowler's ideas as stated in his work *Kinds of Literature* also are worthy of our notice. Fowler thinks that the fixed historical genres are not at all fixed, but mutable, continually renewed repertoires of characteristic features. Such repertoires are not a means of classification so much as a resource of signs in a language or coding system that allows intelligible communication. “Change of the repertoires is continual, for new works signify precisely by their modulating of specific previous states of the genre. Hence their own addition to it modifies the existing state, and a series of such successive changes may alter it almost out of recognition.”<sup>②</sup> These changing kinds or genres consist not of complete

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<sup>①</sup>Fowler, Alastair. “Genre”, *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. New York: Routledge, p. 151.

<sup>②</sup>Ibid., p. 158.

repertoires, but only of a few representative features, mostly rhetorical. Obviously, Fowler here adopts a diachronic approach in treating genre: genre can be taken as a continually dynamic metamorphosis and in the process, genres undertake temporary mixtures, hybrids or modulations, which might be combined to form new ones. This is just what Schiller once described: the evolution of genre from “primitive” or “naive” to “artificial” or “sentimental” versions and what C. S. Lewis developed: a distinction between a fresh “primary” stage and a “secondary”, self – consciously imitative stage.

Since genre can be defined in the theory of “family resemblance”, then another problem arises naturally: what constitutes the similarity of a family, or by what ways one distinguishes one family from the other? Modern critics and scholars give up Aristotle’s elements such as “the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation”, and also cast away classicists’ formal aspects such as dialect, vocabulary, and meter. Instead, they introduce widely a rather vague term “convention” to replace those traditional criteria in establishing boundaries between genres. Convention is neither a formal aspect nor a content aspect, but both. A genre is composed of certain distinctive conventions and these conventions are historically – formed. The conventions refer to the recurring features or the family resemblances within a genre. It is this set of conventions that tells this “family” from that of the other. The use of convention has seemed to solve the controversies between form and content that have haunted people for many years.

Here the conventions of the Gothic novel may well reveal something for this point. Kosofsky E. Sedgwick in his *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* summarizes the following as the rules of the Gothic novel:

- “1. The setting will include ‘an oppressive ruin’ in ‘a wild landscape’ in a European country which is ‘a Catholic or feudal society’.
2. At the centre of the story will be a heroine conspicuous for her ‘trembling sensitivity’ and her lover, whose behavior will show great ‘impetuosity’.
3. Also central to the story will be a ‘tyrannical older man’, usually described as having a ‘piercing gaze who is going to imprison and try to rape or murder them’.
4. The form of the novel will be ‘discontinuous and involuted’.
5. Certain topics will regularly recur, for example: an interest in the ‘priesthood and monastic institutions; sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscure family ties’.
6. The reader will regularly observe the ‘possibilities of incest’, ‘unnatural echoes or silences’ and the ‘poisonous effects of guilt and shame’.
7. ‘Unintelligible writings’ will regularly be discovered; much will explicitly be said to be ‘un-

speakable'. ”<sup>①</sup>

According to Wittgenstein's conception, these conventions are shared by the Gothic novel as a whole, but a single Gothic novel may not necessarily exhibit all these conventions. Moreover, these conventions not only involve the formal aspects but also the content aspects such as the theme and motif. For the latter part, many critics point out the close tie between a certain genre and the generation of the meaning of the text (sometimes the meaning is inherent within a genre) and the intention of the author produced by this genre. On the part of the readers who are familiar with a genre they will feel no difficulty in recognizing the formal conventions of the genre and form assumptions of intended meaning more easily. As Alastair Fowler points out, "organization according to genre offers a rich encyclopedia of mutually related words, formal patterns, ideas, emotions and shared assumptions, on which readers automatically draw for relevant items."<sup>②</sup> So in a sense genres constitute horizons of meaning of a literary text.

Now with these considerations in examining the history of British literature, we want to paint a picture which is different from that of most previously published books of this kind. The history of British literature can be observed as an evolution of genres. The change and transformation of different genres brought about the originality to, provided impetus to and breathed vitality into British literature. In another word, the development of British literature firstly and mainly manifests itself in the coming and going of genres or the transformation of generic conventions in particular. Each age is marked out with some predominant genres that stand for the literary achievement of the age: the traditional epic *Beowulf* in the Anglo-Saxon period, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* written in heroic couplet in the Middle Ages, the sonnets of Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare and Shakespearian drama in the Renaissance, the Metaphysical Poetry, Milton's literary epics, Bunyan's prose work and the comedy of manners in the seventeenth century, Pope's heroic couplets, Addison and Steele's essays and English novels of realism in the eighteenth century, Romantic lyrics and narrative poems by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats, Romantic essays by Lamb and De Quincey, Scott's historical novels and Jane Austen's domestic novels in the Romantic period, the novels of critical realism, sensation novels and Wilde comedies in the Victorian Age, modernist poetry represented by Yeats and Auden, modernist novels represented by Woolf, Joyce and Lawrence, and the Theatre of Absurdity in the first half of the twentieth century, and postmodernist novels and poetry of animals by Ted Hughes in the second half of the twentieth century.

And this evolution resulted either from the external forces or from the internal forces and realized itself in the means of introduction, imitation, or domestication of foreign genres, continuation of old genres but fused with new elements, innovation of genres, or hybridization of different subgenres into a new one.

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<sup>①</sup>Sedgwick, E. Kosofsky. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. London; Methuen, 1989. p. 63.

<sup>②</sup>Fowler, Alastair. "Genre", *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. New York; Routledge, 1990. p. 161.

While writers' contributions and achievements are evaluated by innovating or enriching genres, readers in reading and learning literature always come into contact with genres first and they have a habit of putting literary texts into categories, which is one convenient way of grasping literature. So the description of this evolution will become the main task and focus of this book. Of course, in the account of the evolution of genres, we should not ignore those factors and conditions that spur the coming of new genres and precipitate the decline or disappearance of old ones.

We believe that this understanding of the history of British literature may help students have a quicker and easier access to the essence of literature. Therefore, their studies will not only enlarge their vision of the history of British literature, but also improve their ability of appreciating literature at large.



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# Chapter One

## *English Literature in the Anglo – Saxon Period*

### **Section One The Historical and Cultural Context**

Anglo – Saxon England, the period that roughly covered the seventh to the eleventh century, may be divided into two historical periods: Pre – and Post – Viking Ages. The former was mainly a time of Latinity represented by Aldhelm (ca. 640 – ca. 709), Bede (ca. 673 – 735), and Alcuin (ca. 735 – 804), while the latter was a unified England dominated by King Alfred and his descendants.

According to Bede, the Germanic tribes came to Britain in about the year 449 at the invitation of Vortigern, king of the Celts, to fight against attacks of the Scots and Picts. When the Celts failed in their agreement to supply the Anglo – Saxons with what they had promised, the foreign troops revolted and the first Germanic settlers invited their relatives from overseas to join them.

These Germanic invaders, pagan and illiterate, held the same religion as the related Germanic tribes on the continent. The arrival of St. Augustine in 597 embarked on the conversion of the pagan English to Christianity. Within seventy years or so, the majority of the British residents became Christianized. This may adequately explain why the term “Anglo – Saxon literature” is often dated from the seventh century.

The language of the Anglo – Saxons, widely known as “Old English” today, branched out into four major dialects, namely, Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon and Kentish. Because it is West Saxon that is most commonly reflected in the extant manuscripts, the dialect is often found in modern Old English course books.

The violent clashing of Viking and Anglo – Saxon cultures that began in around 786 resulted in the creation of the Danelaw ruled by the Vikings and in the reign of the Danish King Cnut as king of England after Æthelred’s death in 1016. King Cnut and his sons ruled until 1042, when the old line was restored by Æthelred’s son, Edward “the Confessor”. Edward’s heirless death in 1066 precipitated the dispute over the succession, which led to the Norman Conquest.

The Norman Conquest issued in the displacement of the entire Anglo – Saxon ruling elite by the



French. For two and a half centuries after 1066, the cultural trend was wholly in favor of French; however, Anglo-Saxon culture did not come to an end with the arrival of the Normans; Old English texts continued to be copied in the monastic cathedrals for another century and a half.

## Section Two The Literary Tradition and the Innovation

Old English is a Germanic language. Compared with modern English, Old English is a quite highly inflected language: the relationship between words in a sentence is more often indicated by the different inflexional endings added to nouns, adjectives, articles, pronouns and verbs, not so much expressed by word order or an extended use prepositions. In this respect, the structure of Old English is closer to that of modern German than to modern English.

Augustine's arrival in Kent in 597 can be seen as the intellectual making of England. In the earlier centuries of the period, almost all the religious texts were copied in Latin, though English writings, such as Cædmon's *Hymn*, may have been in circulation. It is towards the end of the ninth century when King Alfred was in reign that Old English emerged as an important medium for the written language. Thus, the history of Old English religious prose began nearly three centuries after the beginnings of English Christianity.

From about 700 onwards, manuscripts were written in both Latin and English. Everything that survives in Anglo-Saxon literature was once selected for copying by highly trained Anglo-Saxon scribes. In many cases, they were monks working in a regulated Christian culture. The domination of the transmission of the texts in this manner explains why it is so challenging for the modern world to get to know much about Anglo-Saxon paganism, or about Anglo-Saxon women or the domestic life of the common people. The surviving record is heavily weighted towards Christian learning and the affairs of people of high status.

There are about a thousand manuscripts which have passed down to today, varying in date from the late seventh century until the time of the Norman Conquest. Anglo-Latin, the Latin language used in Anglo-Saxon England, earned its deserved role as the most significant body of prose writings. As far as the texts in Old English are concerned, 90 percent of the surviving corpus of vernacular literature is composed of prose. Poetry takes up only 10 percent of extant literary works, almost thirty thousand lines in total.

The genre of prose has been understood as an unadorned form of language, written or spoken, in ordinary usage. However, the composition of ordered Anglo-Saxon prose was not simply a matter of the conversion of speech into writing. The documentary history of Old English prose made its presence felt in the reign of King Alfred, with the translations of Alfred himself and his intellectual circle, but the great



flowering of prose dated from the 960s, when prose was to be written in a remarkable variety of styles to suit the considerable range of subjects covered, and later in the hands of Ælfric (ca. 950 – ca. 1010) and Wulfstan (ca. 950 – 1023).

In general distinction, Old English poetry can roughly be classified into two major generic types: the religious and the secular poems. Most Old English religious poems are the ones centralizing on Christianity and beneath the secular poems are the sub-genres of heroic poems and elegies. The generic term “heroic” here refers to those works that are concerned with the continental Germanic legends. Loyalty was the virtue binding the lord and the retainer and fame was the destined goal of a Germanic warrior:

“Grieve not, wise king! Better it is  
for every man to avenge his friend  
than mourn overmuch. Each of us must come  
to the end of his life; let him who may  
win fame before death. That is the best  
memorial for a man after he is gone.”  
(*Beowulf*, lines 1384 – 9)<sup>①</sup>

In Anglo – Saxon society, sustaining loyalty was ensured in the lord’s endowment of treasure: rings, armors, horses or weapons. Their poets retained a keen interest in continental Germanic topics even long after the English had been Christianized. The better – known extant Old English heroic poems are *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Finnsburh*, *Waldere* (Walter), *Widsith*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *The Battle of Brunanburh*.<sup>②</sup>

In technique, the basic unit of the Old English verse is a four – stress alliterative line. Each line is made up of two half – lines. Each half – line contains two strongly stressed syllables and a variable number of lightly stressed ones. The foundation of this system lies in the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables. The consonants alliterate with themselves, while all vowels alliterate with one another. The key syllable within the verse line is the first stressed syllable in the second – half line; the word which receives this stress is often the most relevant to the meaning of the entire line. In Old English verse, the fourth stressed syllable in a line is normally the only one which may not alliterate. Usually nouns and adjectives carry the stresses. In order to satisfy the requirements of the alliterative line, the poet often needed for his key concepts a fairly wide choice of words, especially nouns, with different initial sounds.

The alliterative meter retained its attraction for English speakers long after the Norman Conquest.

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<sup>①</sup>Chickering, Howell D., ed. *Beowulf: A Dual – Language Edition*. New York: Anchor Books, 1977. p. 129.

<sup>②</sup>Most Old English poems are found in four major manuscripts, all of which are dated within the period between the second half of the tenth century and the first half of the eleventh. Specific composing dates of these poems remain uncertain.



In the fourteenth century, the so-called “alliterative revival” produced *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1375 – 1400) and *Piers Plowman* (ca. 1370s), and alliteration continued to exert its influence on the meter of dramatic verse in the fifteenth century. The Germanic alliterative line could also be seen as the “basis of the blank verse meter of the sixteenth century”<sup>①</sup>.

The study of the Old English language and texts has a long tradition. During the Middle English period, from the thirteenth century onwards, rapid and radical changes in the English language meant that there were few who were able or willing to read Old English texts. The language was then recovered by scholars of Henry VIII in the sixteenth century for the king to prove that the stance of the newly formed Church of England on key doctrinal matters was historically justified. In the seventeenth century, the best-known writer to concern himself with Anglo-Saxon matters was John Milton, the last three books of whose *History of Britain* (1670, in six books, probably started in the 1650s) were devoted to the Anglo-Saxons. It has often been speculated that his conception of Satan as a romantic anti-hero in *Paradise Lost* was inspired by the heroically individualized Satan of *Genesis B*. Indeed, the Old English poem was published in 1655 by Franciscus Junius, who was almost certainly an acquaintance of Milton's.

Anglo-Saxon studies were first created by German scholars in the nineteenth century, who expected to look into the Germanic past in Old English literature. Starting around the middle of the twentieth century, scholars began to lay great emphasis upon the importance of Christian doctrines in Old English poetry. At present, authorities in the field started to retrospect the Anglo-Saxons' clinging persistently to their story and their cultural identity. Practically all Old English texts are now available in printed editions, and their language has been thoroughly analyzed and described.

## Section Three The Poetry

Four manuscripts account for the major body of surviving Old English poetry, all written within the period 975 – 1025: The Junius (or “Cædmon”) Manuscript, the *Vercelli Book*, the *Exeter Book*, and the *Beowulf* – manuscript (or “Nowell Codex”).

Most of the poems in these manuscripts are Christian in content, not marked as verse, but written out in the same manner as present-day prose. Just like Old English prose, the poems lack the norms of word division and standardized punctuation familiar from a print culture. In addition, there are often ambiguities about where a particular work begins or ends. None of them are titled in the manuscripts; all the titles and most of the familiar layout of Old English verse were added by the hands of modern scholars.

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<sup>①</sup>Godden, Malcolm & Michael Lapidge, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. p. 70.

Nearly all the Old English poems extant are anonymous. Cædmon and Cynewulf were the only two exceptions. The former poet was famous for his nine – line *Hymn*, included in as an addition to Bede's Latin *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, and the latter composed four poems: *Elene*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Juliana* and *Christ II* (lines 440 – 866 of *Christ*).

## 1. The Religious Poems

A self – contained religious tradition has long been developed by the Anglo – Saxons even before the emergence of Christianity. When Christianity did arrive, they accepted certain basic tenets, but did not invalidate the pervasive and long – lasting nature of their former creeds. This partly explains the mixture of elements of Christianity and paganism in Old English works that have survived.

Cædmon's nine – line hymn in honor of God the Creator was the first Christian poem to be composed in English. According to Bede's account, Cædmon was visited by an angel, who compelled and inspired the peasant to sing a hymn of creation.

Next to Cædmon's *Hymn*, the best – known Old English religious poem is *The Dream of the Rood* (i. e., of the Cross) in the *Vercelli Book*. The poet tells how Christ's cross appeared to him in a dream and recounted the events of the crucifixion and its aftermath. The cross was given heroic human qualities as a noble soldier loyal to Christ, wishing to lay low his enemies. Fragments of part of the poem are also preserved in a Northumbrian version on the borders of a monumental stone cross preserved at Ruthwell in Southwest Scotland, dated to the middle of the eighth century.

The eleventh century Junius manuscript contains three Old Testament poems: *Genesis (A and B)*, *Exodus* and *Daniel*, together with a New Testament poem, *Christ and Satan*. *Genesis (A and B)* is the first and the longest poem, which describes the origin of Satan's feud with God and his success in seducing Adam and Eve from their allegiance to God. To the Christian Anglo – Saxons, the primal sin of Lucifer seemed to be disloyalty. *Exodus* focuses on a few central episodes of the book of Exodus; the Hebrews' escape from Egypt, their crossing the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptians. The story is again presented in a strongly heroic and military light; both fleeing Hebrews and pursuing Egyptians were seen as warriors. *Daniel* is based on the deeds of Daniel, the most popular of the Old Testament prophets for the Anglo – Saxons. *Christ and Satan* shows Christ's victory over Satan, the release of Adam and Eve from hell and their reinstatement as God's servants. Again and again the reader is reminded that he should thank Christ for freeing him from prison and guiding him back to his true home.

Cynewulf may have been writing in ninth – century Mercia. He signed four of his poems with signature: *Christ II*, *Juliana*, *Elene*, and *The Fates of the Apostles*. *Christ II* is concerned with Christ's ascension; *Juliana* concerns with St Juliana, who was executed under the reign of emperor Maximian (d. 310); *Elene* is an account of the search for and finding of the true cross in Jerusalem by Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine; and *The Fates of the Apostles* is a brief martyrology that contemplated the deaths joyously faced by the twelve apostles. The first two poems were included in the *Exeter Book*, while the latter were in the *Vercelli Book*, a late tenth – century collection of religious prose and verse, probably taken to Vercelli in northern Italy by an English traveler in the eleventh or twelfth century.



## 2. *Beowulf* and Other Heroic Poems

*Beowulf* is the work of Old English literature that has become an immense academic interest of scholars since its publication in early nineteenth century. It is generally held to be the first great narrative poem in the English language. This heroic tale, 3,182 lines in length, is strongly linked to the Germanic roots of the English nation and displays the qualities of the English language before the Norman Conquest.

The story of the poem opens in Denmark. King Hrothgar has long been afflicted by a huge demon, Grendel, who at night kills and eats the warriors in the king's great hall, Heorot. Beowulf, a prince of the Geats, a tribe located in southeastern Sweden, hears of Hrothgar's distress and travels with fourteen followers to Hrothgar's realm. On the night of his arrival Grendel attacks again, but Beowulf tears off the creature's arm before he flees howling in pain. On the following night, Grendel's vengeful mother appears and attacks the hall, but is later tracked and killed by Beowulf with a giant sword in her cave. Hrothgar bestows lavish gifts on Beowulf and his men, who return to Geatland and receive a warm welcome by the Geatish King Hygelac.

After the death of Hygelac and his son, Beowulf ascends the throne and rules peacefully for fifty years, until a robber disturbs a sleeping dragon that guards a treasure hidden in a grave – mound. The dragon awakes and flies flaming through the night, burning down a large part of the kingdom. With the help of his kinsman Wiglaf, Beowulf finally slays the dragon, but has received his death – wound. He bids farewell to Wiglaf and dies. At the end of the poem, the impending fall of the Geatish nation is predicted.

The central subject of the poem is the triumphs of Beowulf, particularly his triumph over Grendel and his mother in the first part of the poem and over the fire breathing dragon in the second. It seems ironical that the great “national epic” of England does not mention a single Englishman, but we may assume that to the Anglo – Saxons, the Scandinavians described in the poem would have seemed very close to their ancestors.

In structure, the poem breaks into two narrative units: Beowulf's youth ( lines 1 – 2199 ) and Beowulf's old age ( lines 2200 – 3182 ), with a fifty – year gap between the two periods. This gigantic gap of fifty years between the hero's rise and fall suggests powerfully that even a long life like Beowulf's is a matter of fleeting brevity. The omnipotence of fate and the inevitability of death are certainly the keynotes of the Anglo – Saxon spirit.

The hero's preparation for each fight reflects the ever – increasing threat of his opponents; before the Grendel – fight, he removes his armor and confronts the monster bare – handed; in the fight with Grendel's mother, he is persuaded to take Unferth's sword, and when it fails him, he uses the sword in the cave to kill his foe; and for the battle with the dragon, Beowulf is fully armed and orders a special iron shield forged for his protection, but does not survive the fatal wounds.

The steady progression of increasingly dangerous challenges also provides the basic structure of the narrative. When Beowulf confronts Grendel, he defeats his foe fairly quickly; the fight with Grendel's mother in her cave proves difficult enough to almost cost his life, luckily saved for the chance discovery of a supernatural sword that enables him to win the battle; and in the final fight, the fire breathing dragon is so powerful that the hero cannot defeat him without help from a companion, and he is himself killed.



The name of the poet and the date of the actual composition of the poem remain unknown, though the likelihood may be “the eighth century or the earlier part of the ninth”<sup>①</sup>. Grendel and his mother are given an ancestry that derives from Cain. The hero Beowulf was considered to be born near the end of the fifth century AD and died late in the sixth century.

*Beowulf* was first published in 1815, but the poem was so badly edited, and so inadequately understood, that it was not until the appearance of J. M. Kemble’s edition in 1833 that serious literary studies of the poem could be undertaken. Throughout the nineteenth century, German philological methods dominated *Beowulf* scholarship and Old English scholarship in general. There was much nationalist sentiment underlying the complaints of late nineteenth – century English linguists and literary scholars about this dominance of German scholarship, which led to Henry Sweet’s insistence on replacing the commonly known “barbarous and unmeaning title of ‘Anglo – Saxon’” with “Old English”<sup>②</sup>.

By far, J. R. R. Tolkien’s “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” may have been the most influential literary criticism of the poem ever published. First delivered as a lecture in 1936, it denies the poem as an “epic,” a term borrowed from Greek literature, calls it a “heroic – elegiac” poem, and asserts that “*Beowulf* is indeed the most successful Old English poem because in it the elements, language, meter, theme, structure, are all most nearly in harmony”<sup>③</sup>.

In addition to *Beowulf*, other better – known heroic poems that celebrated the Germanic peoples on the continent include *Widsith*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Battle of Finnsburh*, and *The Battle of Brunanburh*. Written upon prepared calf, sheep, or goat skins, manuscripts were precious objects. Seldom were they expected to have been filled with matter unrelated to the sacred duties of the religious houses where they were exclusively made.

Among these, *The Battle of Maldon* was composed as praise for the heroic resistance of the English army against a substantial force of Vikings in 991. The only copy of the poem was badly burned in the disastrous Cotton fire of 1731, lacking a beginning and an end. The poem recorded that the Vikings succeeded in talking their way across the ford to get to the Englishmen before they could begin their defense. When Byrhtnoth died a heroic death, his faithful followers urged each other to continue the fight to avenge their beloved lord or die. The end of the story saw the courageous death of the soldiers, who prove to be loyal both to their lord and to the commitment for each other. Throughout the fragment, the basic heroic codes of loyalty and honor of the Anglo – Saxon society have been fully expressed.

### 3. Elegies

Among the ten Old English poems that are classified into the genre of “elegy”, seven have received

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①Lapidge, Michael, and others, eds. *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo – Saxon England*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. p. 62.

②Sweet, Henry, ed. *King Alfred’s West – Saxon Version of Gregory’s Pastoral Care*. London: Trech, Trübner, 1871. p. v.

③Nicholson, Lewis E. ed. *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*. Notre Dames: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963. pp. 83 – 85.