

武汉大学英文系英美文学系列教材

# 英国文学教程

A Course Book of  
English Literature

张伯香 主 编  
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武汉大学出版社

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武汉大学英文系英美文学系列教材

**A COURSE BOOK OF ENGLISH  
LITERATURE**

**英国文学教程 (I)**

**BY ZHANG BOXIANG  
CHENG XUEMENG**

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## Preface

*A Course Book of English Literature* is compiled primarily with the aim to meet the needs of the Chinese college students who have majored in English language and literature. This course book, which is based on many years of teaching practice, generally covers the lives, literary careers and artistic features of the English writers; it provides the students with some knowledge on historical and cultural backgrounds, on literary trends and literary schools; it also includes some selected readings from the important works of the major English writers. Special emphasis is laid on the introduction of the major writers and on the analysis of their masterpieces.

Here I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all my friends and colleagues as well as my former students who have given their invaluable suggestions and comments in the course of writing this book. I would also like to thank the editors and workers of Wuhan University Press who are directly responsible for the publication of this book. Finally my acknowledgment goes to those writers together with their publishers whose works are quoted or selected as reading materials.

As this book is compiled within a short time, surely there is

much to be improved. Suggestions and criticisms are sincerely welcomed.

**Zhang Boxiang**

**1997.3**

## CONTENTS

Lecture One	Old English Literature .....	(1)
Lecture Two	Middle English Literature .....	(20)
Lecture Three	Geoffrey Chaucer .....	(46)
Lecture Four	Early Scottish Poetry .....	(89)
Lecture Five	The Popular Ballads .....	(93)
Lecture Six	Renaissance in England .....	(116)
Lecture Seven	Thomas More .....	(126)
Lecture Eight	The Elizabethan Poetry .....	(143)
Lecture Nine	Edmund Spenser .....	(161)
Lecture Ten	The Early English Drama .....	(179)
Lecture Eleven	Christopher Marlowe .....	(191)
Lecture Twelve	William Shakespeare(I) .....	(212)
Lecture Thirteen	William Shakespeare(II) .....	(235)
Lecture Fourteen	Ben Jonson and Other Dramatists .....	(294)
Lecture Fifteen	John Donne and Metaphysical Poetry .....	(313)
Lecture Sixteen	Francis Bacon .....	(351)
Lecture Seventeen	John Milton .....	(360)
Lecture Eighteen	John Dryden .....	(409)
Lecture Nineteen	John Bunyan .....	(427)
GLOSSARY	.....	(442)

## **Lecture One**

### **Old English Literature**

Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, period extends from about 450 to 1066, the year of the Norman-French conquest of England. The Germanic tribes from Europe who overran England in the 5th century, after the Roman withdrawal, brought with them the Old English, or Anglo-Saxon language, which is the basis of Modern English. They brought also a specific poetic tradition, the formal character of which remained surprisingly constant until the termination of their rule by the Norman-French invaders six centuries later.

#### **I. The Historical Background**

Since historical times England where the early inhabitants were Celts has been conquered three times. It was conquered by the Romans, the English, and the Normans. It was only England that felt the full weight of these conquests. Scotland, Ireland, and, in part, Wales were left almost untouched. And of the three it was only the English conquest that had lasting effects. In 43 A. D. the Romans landed in Britain and made South Britain a Roman province. People had to pay tribute or taxes to the Roman Empire. But they still kept their own language, their own customs and religion. The Romans had ruled England for



almost 4 centuries. When the Roman Empire declined and its troops left England, the tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes invaded the island from Northern Europe around the fifth century. They drove the native Celts away from England into Wales, Scotland, and even into Ireland across the sea. The three tribes gradually settled down and mixed into a whole people called English. Although the Celtic languages are dying out, the Celtic literature, which is full of wonder and tender magic, can still be felt today.

The Anglo-Saxons were heathen. They originally worshipped the Heaven and the Earth, which were regarded by them as the Father and Mother of all things. To protect the people, the glorious Summer, which was said to be the son of the Heaven and the Earth, fought bravely against the evil Winter and the Frost Giants, and other monsters. They also had their own gods such as Woden and Thor. In the year 597, St. Augustine was sent from Rome as a missionary to Kent, one of the southernmost kingdoms into which England was divided. And about the same time missionaries from Ireland began to preach Christianity in the north. Within a century or so the whole island was Christianized.

## II. Old English Poetry

Much of Old English poetry was probably intended to be chanted, with harp accompaniment, by the Anglo-Saxon bard. Often bold and strong, but also mournful and elegiac in spirit, this poetry emphasizes the sorrow and ultimate futility of life and the helplessness of humans before the power of fate. Generally

speaking, all the old English poetry that has survived can be divided into two groups: the secular poetry and the religious one.

## 2.1 The Religious Group

The religious group is mainly on biblical themes or on saints' lives. But usually there is a mixture of Christian and pagan ideas in these poems. *Genesis A* and *Genesis B* are two poems based on the Old Testament. The second one was a good piece of writing, concerning with the creation of the world and the fall of the angels. Another poem taken straight from the Bible is *Exodus*, which describes how the Israelites left Egypt. The hero of the poem, Moses, sounds very much like Beowulf. *The Dream of the Rood* comes from the New Testament. It is the first dream poem in English literature. Rood means in Old English a cross which, at once bleeding and glorious, is an image of shame and redemption. In this poem, Christ is portrayed as the young warrior striding to embrace death and victory, while the cross itself takes on the burden of his suffering. In *The Phoenix*, the fabulous bird, leaving its earthly paradise to die and be reborn, becomes an image of Christ's Passion and Resurrection. Such religious poems suggest how the church and its poets believed the true function of art was not simply to release feeling but to teach others and enhance devotion.

## 2.2 The Secular Group

In addition to these religious compositions, Old English poets produced the national epic poem, *Beowulf*, and a number of more or less lyrical poems of shorter length, which do not contain specific Christian doctrine and which evoke the Anglo-Saxon

sense of the harshness of circumstance and the sadness of the human lot. *The Wanderer*, *Deor*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wife's Complaint* are among the most beautiful of this group of Old English poems. Most of the secular group are laments, the lament of an exile, of a masterless bard, a hungry sailor on the wintry seas, a wife parted from her husband. The harsh climate of North Sea strongly affected the tone or mood of the poets. The life is sorrowful, and the speakers are fatalistic, though at the same time courageous and determined.

### 2. 3 Caedmon, the "Father of English Song"

In those far-off days, hardly any of the men and women of England could read or write, for it was still the listening time. People learned the history of their country from songs of the minstrels. And it was in this way, too, that they came to learn the Bible stories. It is said that Caedmon, a shy and middle-aged cowherd in Whitby, was the man who, having received the gift of song from God, first started to sing Christian songs in English. It is said that he sang the creation of the world, the origin of man, and all the history of *Genesis*, and made many verses based on the Old and New Testaments, such as the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt, and their entering into the land of promise. Thus, he was regarded as the "Father of English Song". This story of Caedmon was told by the historian and theologian Saint Bede the Venerable. But there were no books of Caedmon's left except for a few lines quoted by Bede.

### 2. 4 *Beowulf*

*Beowulf* is the first great English literary work and is re-

garded as the national epic of the Anglo-Saxons. However, the hero and the setting of *Beowulf* have nothing to do with England, for the story took place in Scandinavia, where existed a society that was highly civilized and rather newly Christian. The poem was originally in an oral form, sung by the bards (minstrels) at the end of the 6th century. The present script was written down in the 10th century. Beginning and ending with the funeral of a great king, and composed against a background of impending disaster, *Beowulf* describes the exploits of a Scandinavian culture hero, Beowulf, in destroying the monster Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a fire-breathing dragon. In these sequences Beowulf is shown not only as a glorious hero but as a savior of the people. The Old Germanic virtue of mutual loyalty between leader and followers is evoked effectively and touchingly in the aged Beowulf's sacrifice of his life and in the reproaches heaped on the retainers who have deserted him in this climactic battle. The extraordinary artistry with which fragments of other heroic tales are incorporated to illumine the main action, and with which the whole plot is reduced to symmetry, has only recently been fully recognized.

#### 2.4.1 The Story

The poem opens with praise of the deeds of the Danes, Scyld their king, and his descendants. One of these, Hrothgar, builds a great hall, Heorot, for big gatherings and feasts with his followers. The hall has been laid waste for twelve years by a monster named Grendel who has overwhelmed many brave warriors in his nightly visits to the place, accomplishing many murders. The dreadful tidings spread to the Geats, a neighbouring tribe across the sea, in the south of Sweden. Beowulf, the

nephew of Higelac, king of the Geats, and a famed slayer of monsters, hearing of the trouble, comes with 14 companions across the sea to give assistance, and is welcomed by Hrothgar. Beowulf and his men sleep in the hall; Grendel breaks in and devours Hondscio, one of Beowulf's men, and seizes Beowulf, who unarmed wrestles with him and wrenches off his arm. Grendel, mortally wounded, makes off to his lair. The Danes rejoice over the victory; and Hrothgar rewards Beowulf. But in the night that follows, Grendel's mother, a water-hag, enters the hall to revenge her son, and carries off Aeschere, the counselor of Hrothgar. Beowulf follows her to her cave under the waves and fights with her. In the terrible combat, Beowulf's sword fails to wound her; without his woven armor he might have been killed. Then he sees an old sword, made by giants, among the armor in the cave; and with this he cuts off the witch's head, and also the head of Grendel, who is lying in the cave. Beowulf returns to Heorot triumphantly. A merry feast is held to celebrate the happy event. Hrothgar praises him highly, but also warns him against pride. With lots of gifts, Beowulf and his Geats return to their native land. Beowulf surrenders all the gifts to Higelac, his king, and receives in return a part of the kingdom.

After the death of Higelac and his son, Heardred, Beowulf succeeds to the kingdom, where he reigns for fifty years. And now, a fire-dragon starts to devastate the country because some of the treasure it has been guarding is stolen. Beowulf and eleven companions go out to fight the monster. But when the dragon breathes out fire, all the companions, save Wiglaf, fly to a wood. Beowulf's sword breaks, and the dragon sets its teeth in Beowulf's neck. Wiglaf wounds it, and its strength wanes. Be-

owulf finally kills the dragon; but the aged king himself is also mortally wounded. He bids Wiglaf bring the treasure out of the mound, that he may see it. He directs that a barrow be built for him on the Whale's Headland, and dies. Wiglaf rebukes his companions and sends word of Beowulf's death. The poem ends with the description of the hero's funeral and the people's panegyric of his virtues.

#### 2. 4. 2 Heroic Ideal

*Beowulf* is essentially an aristocratic poem concerned with the heroic ideal of kings and kingship in North Europe. The social patterns described in the poem are rigidly feudal, highly violent. Battle is a way of life. Strength and courage are basic virtues for both kings and his warriors. The hero-king strives to do better than any one else the things that are vitally important to the happy life of his people. The king should protect his people and show gentleness and generosity to his warriors. And in return, his warriors should show absolute obedience and loyalty to the king. By praising Beowulf's wisdom, strength and courage, and by glorifying his death for his people, the poem presents the heroic ideal of a king and his good relations to his warriors and people.

#### 2. 4. 3 The Structure

According to the contents of the story, the poem can be divided into three parts:

Part I: the fight against Grendel

Part II: the fight against Grendel's mother

Part III: the fight against the Dragon

*Beowulf* is an oral poem and for centuries the bards sing it to the people. As it is quite long, the bard could only sing a part

of the story each night. Usually he would sing one adventure on the first night about the battle with Grendel. Then on the second night, he would continue and sing about Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother. However, there might be some new listeners. So before he came to the second adventure, he would give a short summary about what he sang the night before. And on the third night, he would give a longer summary about what happened on the first two nights. There is also a prelude to invent an allusion to the real story and to serve as a contrast or comparison to the main story. The poem begins with the funeral of a king and rounds up with that of another.

#### 2.4.4 The Theme

*Beowulf*, which centers on the narration of the exploits of the heroic figure Beowulf, is mainly about his three major adventures. It reflects a life of fights and feasting, of ceremony, of brilliant gold and sudden darkness. Here is a world of sacred obligations, feud and vengeance with heroic figures who are proud of their birth and their physical strength. But beyond this, the forces of *wyrd* (fate) seem to control man's destiny with mysterious omnipotence, while evil itself is both primordial and powerful. However, thematically the poem presents a vivid picture of how the primitive people wage heroic struggles against the hostile forces of the natural world under a wise and mighty leader. The poem is an example of the mingling of nature myths and heroic legends. For those interested in symbols, the simplest interpretation of the myths in the poem is to regard Beowulf's successive fights against the three monsters as the overcoming of the hostile forces of nature by man's indomitable will and perseverance. For instance, the battle between Beowulf and the Drag-

on symbolically represents that phase of Winter and Summer myth in which the Summer God, here embodied by Beowulf, fights his last battle against the Winter Dragon in order to rescue the treasures of earth, that is, the golden corn and ruddy fruits. Having given them back to men, Beowulf himself dies of the Winter's breath.

#### 2. 4. 5 The Mixing of Pagan and Christian Elements

As the poem was originally composed by pagans, it naturally embodied pagan ideas such as the heroic ideal of a king, the value of warrior society, the belief in fatalism, and the theme of vengeance, etc. But when the poem was later written down by a Christian, some Christian ideas were added to it. For example, God is said to be the Creator of all things, and His will seems recognized as being identical with Fate; Grendel is described as a descendant of Cain; and Hell and the Devil are ready to receive the souls of Grendel and his mother.

#### 2. 5 Artistic Features of Old English Poetry

The communal and oral nature of the Old English poetry accounts for a number of its characteristic features. Firstly, Old English poetry is strongly characterized with structural alliteration. Each full line has four stresses with a number of unstressed syllables, three of which begin with the same sound or letter. Secondly, almost all this poetry is composed without rhyme; its lines are usually divided into two halves with a pause in between, and each half line has two strongly stressed syllables which give musical effects to the poem with an indeterminate number of unstressed ones. Thirdly, to set the verse apart from normal speech and mark it out as a special mode of discourse, it makes



use of vivid poetic diction and parallel expressions for a single idea, especially those of Kennings (compound words, i. e. a word picture) such as: “swan-road” or “whale-path” (which means sea); “sea-wood” or “wave-floater” (which means a ship); “shield-bearer”, “battle-hero” or “spear-fighter” (which means a soldier), etc. All these qualities of form and spirit are exemplified in the epic poem *Beowulf*.

### III. Old English Prose

#### 3.1 The Venerable Bede (673? ~735)

Prose in Old English is represented by a large number of religious works. The imposing scholarship of monasteries in northern England in the late 7th century reached its peak in the Latin work *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People, 731) by Bede, a distinguished, highly literate churchman. It is the first English history book, written in Latin and later translated into English; and it remains an important source of knowledge about the Anglo-Saxon period.

#### 3.2 Alfred the Great (849~899)

King Alfred the Great deserves to be remembered as one of the outstanding figures in English history. He beat off those new Germanic invaders (the Vikings), so that a political stability was achieved for the southern part of England. To rebuild his country, Alfred showed great enthusiasm for knowledge and for the distribution of knowledge. With the help of scholars from England and abroad, he managed to have the wisdom of Latin and