英国文学概论

An Outline History of English Literature

王佳英　编著

黑龙江教育出版社

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前　言

英国是世界上文学领域最具活力的国家之一，对其他各国的文学发展产生过深远而巨大的影响。英国文学的发展实际上是欧洲几十个国家文明发展的自然结晶。它起源于古希腊罗马文学和圣经文学，经中古时期、文艺复兴、古典主义、浪漫主义、自然主义以及各种现代主义文学运动，发展到20世纪，以其迭起的思潮和纷呈的流派显示了强大的艺术生命力，乔叟、莫尔、莎士比亚、密尔顿、笛福、斯威夫特、菲尔丁、斯摩莱特、斯泰恩、彭斯、拜伦、雪莱、司各特、狄更斯、萨克雷、高尔斯华绥、勃朗宁及肖伯纳等这些伟大的作家使世界人民了解了英国、英国的历史和文化，他们中间有许多作家和他们的作品曾经导引世界文学的潮流，成为世界文学宝库的瑰宝，因此，了解英国文学史就是为我们打开了一扇了解西方文化的大门。

英国文学史是大学英语专业在高年级所开设的一门必修课，由于英国文学史的内容庞杂，学生对西方文化的渊源知之甚少，所以，学生学习时比较吃力。为了适应英语专业文学课教学和改革的需要，满足英语学习者深化文学理解力和拓宽知识面的需要，根据学生的具体情况，本书在编写的过程中力求简明扼要地叙述英国文学的历史，以英国文学发展的纵向时间脉络为主线，在清晰阐述历史背景和社会环境的基础上反映丰富多彩的艺术方法、风格、思潮和流派。并根据国内外的资料和研究成果，对作家和作品进行了系统的评价和分析。在每一章节中，首先阐述这一时期英国文学所产生的历史背景、对文学活动产生重要影响的社会运动、社会改革和历史事件及其它国家的文学思潮对英国文学发展的影响等，然后介绍这一时期著名的作家、诗人、剧作家等有代表性的人物生平和主要作品，写作特点及作品中人物的性格特征网络，最后，仔细分析能够代表这一时代的主要作家和他们的经典之作，分析文体特点、语言特色、作品的社会意义、历史意义、对人性和人生问题的探讨等。

本书语言浅显易懂，内容条理清晰，是为学习英国文学入门之导引。作者衷心希望本书能够激发学习者了解英国文学和西方文学的兴趣，扩大人文知识视野，提高文学艺术的鉴赏水平，为他们日后能够用文学理论和审美的视角欣赏解读文学作品奠定基础。

由于经验有限，资料不足，时间又很仓促，本书在编写的过程中难免会有疏漏，恳请读者指教。

编者

2006年3月

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Part One
English Literature of the Anglo-Saxon Period

Chapter One The Anglo-Saxon Period

The English people are of a mixed blood. The earliest inhabitants in the island we now call England were Britons (Brythons; Bretons), A tribe of Celts, from them came the name Britain. The Britons were a primitive people living in the tribal society, belonged to an early stage of the Iron Age. They were divided into dozens of small tribes, each of which lived in a clustering of huts. Very little is known about their beliefs, but we know about their religious ceremonies of May Day, which has become part of the national tradition of the English people.

I. Social Background

In 55 B.C, Britain was invaded by Julius Caesar, the Roman Conqueror. As soon as the Romans landed on the island, the Britons fought stubbornly under the leadership of their chieftains. And with the many changes of Roman generals within the time of a century, Britain was not completely subjugated to the Roman Empire until 78 A. D. With the Roman conquest came the Roman mode of life. Roman theatres and baths quickly rose in the towns. All these refinements of civilization, however, were for the enjoyment of the Roman conquerors while the native Britons were trodden down as slaves. The Roman occupation lasted for about 400 years. Britain became a Roman province, during which there were frequent battles between Britons and Roman.

Then in 410 A.D, the Roman withdrew from Britain to protect Rome herself, all the Roman troops were away, thus ended the Roman occupation of Britain. Aside from temples, roads walls, military camps, some highways, called" streets", joining some of the most important cities, along these roads grew up scores of towns, and London, one of them, became an important trading centre. Traces of which are still visible to the present day, The Roman Conquest of Britain on the whole left no deep impression on its national life.

At the same time Britain was invaded by swarms of pirates. They were three tribes from Northern Europe: Jutes, Anglo and Saxons. These three tribes landed on the British coast, drove westward the original inhabitants and settled down themselves. And by the 7th century these small kingdoms were combined into a united kingdom called England, The three tribes had mixed into a whole people called English. And the three dialects spoken by them naturally grew into a single language. The Anglo-Saxons were Germanic tribes and brought to England the Ger-

manic language and culture. The language spoken by these tribes is generally called Anglo-Saxon English or Saxon English, which is now called Old English constituted the basis of Modern English. It is the ancient English of modern English today.

Beginning from the later part of the 8th century, the Danes, or the Vikings, came to invade England. In the second half of the 9th century King Alfred the Great of Wessex led the Anglo-Saxon kings to defeat the invaders by uniting their forces. In the early 11th century all England was conquered by the Danes for 23 years.

Before the Anglo-Saxons settled down in Britain, they still lived in the tribal society. The chief ruled over them, but he was familiar with them. After the conquest of Britain, the social constitution of the Anglo-Saxons went through some rapid changes. They were ruled by the military commander. The moment had arrived for transforming military leadership into kingship. Therefore, the Anglo-Saxon period witnessed a transition from tribal society to feudalism.

The Anglo-Saxon people were heathen people. They believed in the old mythology of Northern Europe. That is why the Northern mythology has left its mark upon the English language. For example, the days of the week in English are named after the Northern gods. The Anglo-Saxon people were Christianized in the 7th century. Then monasteries were built all over the country. In these monasteries, at a time when only monks could read and write, the earliest English books were written down.

II. Literature

English literature began with the Anglo-Saxon settlement in England. All of them are poems about the heroes deeds of old time to the chiefs and warriors in the feasting-hall.

There were two highlights in the development of the Anglo-Saxon literature.

The first was the Northumbrian School. Its center was the monasteries and abbeys in the kingdom of Northumbria. It was Caedom who lived in the 7th century turned the stories in the Bible into verse form. The title of the work is "Paraphrase". He was the first Anglo-Saxon poet. Another well known figure was the Venerable Bede (673-735), a monk who wrote in Latin and whose work "The Ecclesiatical History of the English People" 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.

The second highlight of the literature happened during the reign of King of Wessex –Alfred. English culture and learning flourished in the north in the 7th and 8th century. Then in the 9th and 10th centuries, the center of learning shifted to the south, to the kingdom of Wessex. Alfred set himself the task of teaching the English people to read and write in their own language. He gathered around him a group of scholars, founded a palace school, and demanded that his officials should try to educate themselves.

Alfred's contributions to English literature are threefold. First, a number of Latin books of educative value were translated into West Saxon dialect. It is said that King Alfred himself translated the history by Bede. Secondly, Alfred was responsible for the launching of "The Anglo–Saxon Chronicle". It began with the story of Caesar's conquest and annually recorded important events until 1154. It is an important history book as well as a piece of literary work. Thirdly, Alfred created a style of Anglo–Saxon prose which was not obscure.

Chapter Two "Beowulf"

I. The Story of "Beowulf"

Beowulf is the national epic of the Anglo–Saxon and English people. The whole epic consists of 3182 lines and is to be divided into two parts. The song is pagan in spirit and matter, while the interpolation is obviously added by the Christian who copied.

The first part talks about the youth of Beowulf, he killed the monster Grendel and his mother–she monster. Then Beowulf became the king of his country, when he was old, he fought against the fire dragon and died. Mourning their dead champion, the people of Jutland composed a dirge praising the great deeds of Beowulf who

"Thus made their mourning the men of Greatland,
For their hero's passing, his hearth–companions
Quoth that of all the kings of earth,
Of men he was the mildest and most beloved,
To his kin the kindest, keenest for praise.

II. The Theme of Its Content

"Beowulf" is a folk legend brought by the Anglo–Saxons from their continental homes. It had been passed from mouth to mouth for hundreds of years before it was written down in the tenth century .Beowulf is a grand hero. He is faithful to his people. He forgets himself in face of death. This epic reflects the ancient people's wish. The king stands together with the people against the crude and terrible

nature.

III. Features of "Beowulf"

The most striking feature is the use of alliteration. In alliterative verse, certain accented words in a line begin with the same consonant sound. This is characteristic of all Old English verse. There are generally 4 accents in a line, three of which show alliteration.

The second feature of "Beowulf" is the use of metaphors and understatements. There are many compound words used in the poem to serve as indirect metaphors that are sometimes very picturesque.

examples:

metaphors ring-giver for king
hearth-companions for his warriors
swan's bath or whale´ s road for sea
sea-wood for ship
battle-hero, shield bearer, spear fighter for soldier

Understatements as
not troublesome for very welcome
need not praise for a right to condemn

These give an impression of vivid description and a tinge of ironical humour. This quality is regarded as a characteristic of English people and their language. Understatements may give an impression of reserve and at times a tinge of ironical humour.

The third feature of the poem is the mixture of pagan and Christian elements. On one hand, plainly heathen and non-Christian elements survive: the observing of omens, the attribution of power to Wyre (i.e. fate), cremation, blood revenge, and the praise of worldly glory —— all woven into the poem. On the other hand, the assumption of God's dominion over the world, of Devil´ s agency among men, of existence of Heaven and Hell, of a Last Judgment, and of the noxiousness of Sin—— are all Christian. As mentioned before, it was the monks who taught the English how to write and how to preserve their poems. Perhaps due to this reason nearly all-Old English literature we know possesses a Christian coloring.

Chapter Three Feudal England

I. Social Background

In the year 1066, the Normans headed by William, defeated Anglo-Saxons at the battle of Hastings, and conquered the whole England. William was crowned as King of England. Revolts were cruelly suppressed and the conquest was completed with sword and fire. It was called the Norman Conquest. This marks the establish-

ment of feudalism in England.

The Normans were originally a hardy race of sea rovers inhabiting Scandinavia. In the tenth century they conquered a part of northern France, which is still called Normandy, and rapidly adopted French civilization and the French language.

The influence of the Norman Conquest on the English Language was great. After the Norman Conquest, the general relation of Normans and Saxons was that of master and servant. The people's social class can be seen from the language they speak. The supper class people speak French while the common people speak English. For a long time the scholar wrote in Latin and the courtier in French. There was almost no written literature in English for a time.

By the end of the fourteenth century, when Normans and English intermingled, English was once more the dominant speech in the country. But now it became something different from the old Anglo-Saxons. English use "calf", "swine" and "sheep" for the animals, French use"veal", "pork" and "mutton" for the flesh served at the noble's table. To words of Anglo-Saxon origin, like"build; ask; begin; wet" were added synonymous words of Norman-French origin"construct; inquire; commence; humid". The English language was greatly enriched by the Norman Conquest.

When England entered the feudal society, the society was divided into two classes: landlords and peasants. The peasants paid rent to the noble people in grain, service, or cash, with little left to sustain themselves. To rule the people, there was a whole network of church government as well as that of the king' s officers. They lived little better than slaves. To make things worse, a disease called Black Death swept over the country (1348-1349), and a third of the population perished of this terrible plague.

At the same time, the war between England and France broke out and lasted for 40 years. The life of the peasants was miserable. The peasants could endure no longer, and the famous Rising of 1381 broke out, and its leaders were Wat Tyler and John Ball. John Ball was a poor priest, whose saying

"When Adam delved and Eve span

Who was then the gentleman?"

became a slogan for the peasants. The rising was bloodily repressed, but the peasants' rising had shaken the feudal system in England to the root.

II. Literature

1. The Content of the Romance

The most prevailing kind of literature in feudal England was the romance. It 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. He was commonly described as riding forth to seek adventures, taking part in tournaments, or fighting for his lord in battle. He was devoted to the church and the king. The rules governing the manners and morals of a knight were known as chivalry. One who wanted to be a knight should serve an apprenticeship as a squire until he was admitted to the knighthood with solemn ceremony and the swearing of oaths.

2.The Romance Cycles

The great majority of the romances fall into three groups or cycles:

Matters of Britain (adventures of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table)

Matters of France (Emperor Charlemagne and his peers)

Matters of Rome (Alexander the Great)

3.The Feature of Literature

The theme of stories in literature is remarkable for its bright, romantic tales of love and adventure. The theme of loyalty to king and lord was repeatedly emphasized in romances, as loyalty was the corner-stone of feudal morality. The most striking one is Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. The most famous one is "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" with an anonymous author.

III. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

1. Content of the story

On New Year′ s day, while Arthur and his knights are keeping the feast, a gigantic knight in green enters the banquet hall on horseback and challenges the bravest knight present to an exchange of blows, Gawain accepts the challenge, takes the battle-ax, and with one blow sends the giant′ s head rolling through the hall. The Green Knight holds out his head and the ghastly lips speak, warning Gawain to be faithful to his promise and to seek through the world till he finds the Green Chapel. There, on next New Year′ s Day, the Green Knight will meet him and return the blow. The second canto of the poem describes Gawain′ s long journey through the wilderness, and his adventures with storm and cold, with wild beasts and monsters, as he seeks in vain for the Green Chapel. At last, he kept his promise and gained the honour for the knights.

2. Feature

a.romance stories. Sometimes in verse, sometimes in prose.

b. The theme of loyalty to king and lord was emphasized in romances.

c. They are literature of nobles. The romance had nothing to do with the common people, and the common people had little to do with them. They were com-

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