

*A Survey
of English Literature*



南开英美文学精品教材

英国文学简史

常耀信 著

南开大学出版社

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You combine detailed knowledge with an eloquent style ... I think a lot of people will learn a lot from the book.

— *Robert C. Cosby*

Foreword

I

This book is a general survey of English literature. It is based on my decades of reading, teaching, and research experience in this literature and my acquaintance with the general tenor of the available literary criticism on it.

The general layout of the book roughly follows the critical notion that the major authors get the lion's share of the space while the lesser lights settle for less or nothing. The 26 chapters here offer a sketch of the major writers with some mention of those, though minor in stature, who have made a scratch on the rock of time in their way. Thus the survey discusses the Old English and Medieval English periods in two chapters, focusing on *Beowulf* and Chaucer; the Elizabethan period in another two, highlighting Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare (as the great age is basically one of poetry and verse drama and the figure of Shakespeare towers so far above all the rest); the whole of the 17th century in one chapter, with Donne and Milton as the primary interests; the Classic 18th century in three, two on poetry and one on fiction, with Pope, Gray, Blake, and Burns in verse and Swift, Defoe, and Fielding in fiction taking up most of the coverage, and the Romantic period in two, centering on Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats. The Victorian period is a preeminent phase of English literary history, in which many writers distinguish themselves in many divisions of literature. They vie vehemently for attention, and none seems able to overshadow the others. So this period takes up eight chapters, with Dickens, George Eliot, and Hardy in fiction, Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold in poetry, and Shaw in drama making a greater claim on time in the discussions. The first decade of the 20th century is handled in one chapter, devoting more space to Conrad; the 1920s in two, touching more on Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, and Yeats; the 1930s in two, discussing Auden, Thomas, Greene,

and Orwell in greater detail; and the postwar period in three, in which Movement poetry with Larkin and Hughes, the “angry young man” fiction with Amis and Sillitoe, other famous novelists like Golding, Lessing, and Murdoch, the theater of the absurd with Beckett, Pinter and Stoppard, and the famous playwright Osborne and some others who have developed a distinct personal signature of their own—all these manage to share most of the space in between them. This is, then, the broad outline of the book.

II

The book is intended to cater to the needs of students, teachers, and the general reading public in their study, teaching, or research in English literature. The survey’s basic features are as follows:

First, it is intended to do an all-purpose and heavy-duty job for its users. Despite its scholarly nature, the book is written in such a way that it serves all those interested in English literature. These include undergraduate students, graduate students, instructors of literature at all levels, and scholars and researchers. It enables undergraduate students to get a quick glimpse at this literature, and helps graduate students of English to study literary history and locate topics for term papers, MA theses, and doctoral dissertations. It also imbeds designs of literature courses for teachers of graduate and undergraduate students, and suggests possible subjects for further research and writing to budding scholars and other researchers in general.

Furthermore, it tries to be specific in its introductions and interpretations. In the introductions of the authors and their works, this survey endeavors to be particular and detailed instead of merely dealing out general statements and juggling with abstractions. Focusing on the analyses of the major works of the major authors, its sole purpose is to help the readers acquire and accumulate a series of concrete experiences of the major authors and their major works so as to help achieve a three-dimensional perspective of English literary history. It offers a variety of possible critical approaches for students and scholars at varying levels to have something to go by or react against at the beginning of their scholarly careers. This is done mainly in the detailed discussions in the text and also with the help of the comprehensive “Notes and References” at the end of the book. “The Notes and References” contains a bibliography of publications that

sum up the cumulative outcomes of generations of careful criticism. The listings are mostly simple, but some are annotated.

Finally, this survey offers a wide leeway for choice for the readers. As it intends to make relevant material available for all around as a resource of reference as well as a textbook, the survey tries to include many authors and works, major or minor, famous or notorious, enjoying critical acclaim or lying in neglect and oblivion. Hopefully the readers may be happy to have a wide range of options in their reading and research. For classroom instruction, it is important for the instructor to choose some from the many sources available so as to fit them into the semester or annual teaching schedule. In the case of Shakespeare or Dickens or many others, for instance, the instructor is free to prioritize and discuss just one major work by these writers and leave the rest as extra-curriculum reading or simply as reference material for the students. The availability should prove, I should hope, to be an asset rather than a liability to classroom instruction.

III

Now I come to the huge amounts of debts I owe in the writing of the book. As English literature is the first major interest in my career, I feel indebted, in my process of immersion in the study and research, to many creditors, from whose indispensable help I have profited profusely. These include a long list of people such as Dr. Robert Cosbey, the late Professors Chen Jia, Wang Zuoliang, and Yang Zhouhan, whose critical spirit as well as writings have either inspired me in my reading or directly enriched the survey in the form of loaned information. I would also mention Hugh Kenner, Leslie Fiedler, and Alfred Kazin, whom I met and heard in person and felt inspired beyond measure by their provocative, seminal modes of perception and the sweep and depth of their critical acumen. In addition, their writings with their pioneering edge have been the sources of my courage in exploring the profundity of literature as a reflection of the human experience. It has been basically in keeping with the spirit more than armed with the knowledge of all these scholars that I began this project well over three years ago. The sky is the limit for my gratitude to them. My debt to all of these people and other people can never be fully discharged in the "Notes and References" that I attach at the end of the book. Any slight or offence on my part

will be my unintentional oversight, and my apologies, when called for, will be ready and forthcoming.

There are, in addition, my Chinese colleagues working hard in the field of foreign literature all over the country. Those of my generation deserve exceptional commendation. Their diligence and perseverance have always been an uphill push to me in our concerted research endeavor. And never should I allow myself to forget my enduring debt to my students of successive generations, of whose responses and research I have taken a good deal of advantage in my writing.

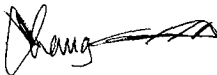
Now I come to my wife, who has been always of help whenever there is need, and whose research and editing and proofreading efforts have been vital to the completion of the book.

IV

Special acknowledgments should be made to the preeminent scholars who have been kind enough to read portions of my manuscript and help improve its quality in conception and execution. These include Dr. Robert C. Cosbey, Professor of English at Columbia University, USA and Regina University of Canada and Dr. Robert A. Burns, Professor of English at the University of Guam, USA. Their help has been essential for me to avoid or forestall unpardonable errors and gaffes of some kinds.

This is not to say, naturally, that the book is free of mistakes by any means. On the contrary, I believe in nothing like perfection and remain painfully awake and aware that there is always ample room for improvement. Here I humbly invite all scholars and readers to feel free to criticize and offer their invaluable advice on the book.

Yaixin Chang, Ph.D.



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April 2005

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Chapter 1 The Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Period • Beowulf • The Middle English Period

The Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Period

The British civilization is one of the oldest in the world. One of its extant signs, the Stonehenge, dates back to 1400-1800 BC, when mankind was still wrapped in the mist of time. This prehistoric monumental pile of stones indicates a fairly advanced level of engineering and astronomy. As such advanced engineering and astronomy could only be part of a whole fairly advanced culture, and an advanced culture, as human history shows, has to have an advanced literature as its offshoot, the ancient people of the land must have had a prehistoric literature of their own. But whatever might have existed, in oral form or otherwise, nothing is left now except for some scraps and fragments. It might have been destroyed by the Celts.

The Celts were probably the first inhabitants of the British Isles in recorded history. These powerfully built and fair-haired people were tenacious and loved war. One of their tribes, the Britons, came over in the 5th century BC, stayed for some five hundred years, and gave its name to the place: "Britain" means "the land of the Britons." The Celts left behind a rich oral tradition of myths and legends, of which the Arthurian legends are an important part. About 55 BC, the Roman soldiers of Julius Caesar came to stay for five centuries and transplanted their civilization to the land. The Romans built roads and bridges, erected sculptures, and built baths beside the warm springs of Bath with heating systems in them. Then the cultural heritage of the Celts and the Romans was destroyed by the invading Anglo-Saxons in the 5th century.

The Anglo-Saxons were a branch of the Germanic tribes who lived at the mouth of the Elbe and along the North Sea. They came over the sea, drove the

Celts to the north and west, and slowly developed their own language and culture. Anglo-Saxon became Old English, and the place became England, or the Angle-land, "the land of the Angles." The period was generally one of wars between the petty kingdoms in the land. In 597 AD 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 and brought peace, security, and prosperity to his kingdom. The king built schools, wrote annals, and encouraged cultural growth. It was King Alfred who decided that literature should be written in the vernacular, or Old English. In 1057 Macbeth, king of Scotland, died, only to be resurrected a few hundred years later in Shakespeare's famous tragedy.¹

Now let's turn to the literature of the period under discussion. The Anglo-Saxon period was basically barren in literary creations. The reason for this was easily found: the fact that people wrote on animal skin and frequently scraped old things out to make room for the new, or the destruction by wars or simply through loss to time—all accounted for the scarcity of writings still extant from the period. What has been left through the ravages of time is mostly fragments. These include both pagan and religious poems. There are, for instance, the pagan poems such as *Widsith*, *Waldhere*, *The Fight at Finnsburg*, *The Complaint of Deor*, *The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *The Battle of Maldon*. For nearly two centuries into the period, pagan poetry and pagan spirit remained dominant on the poetic scene. It was essentially a body of heroic poetry. Mostly the poems were songs about wars, sea-faring, and violence in a cruel world with little or no tenderness or joy (*The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *Waldhere*, and *The Battle of Maldon*). Some tell about the lives of the minstrels, ancient poet-singers, who roamed around entertaining people with stories often of superhuman deeds and in oral traditions (*Widsith* and *The Complaint of Deor*). Some others reflect and record the fine emotional texture of the first English people well for posterity. *The Wife's Lament* and *Ruin* are good examples. The wife in the first of these laments her husband's absence not for her own sake. The man has left because he believes in some slanders about her, but she is not angry with him though she is

innocent. She feels sad because of the pain the misunderstanding has caused her man. This alone defines her as an archetype of an ideal woman. *Ruin* illustrates a very refined and sophisticated feeling of loss for the ruined glory of the past. A wandering minstrel happens to visit the debris of a once grand building and writes a poem about it. Seeing the bleakness of the former prosperous scene, the man meditates upon the pride and joy of the builders and grieves over the fact that they are all no more, sadly devoured by time at the will of the gods. The poet's is a highly civilized, sophisticated mode of thinking and perception indeed.

With the arrival of St. Augustine in 597 AD 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 (c. 670 AD-) 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 someone, apparently an angel, told him to sing of creation, and Caedmon was happy and surprised to find himself singing well. When he awoke, he wrote down what he sang in his sleep. Then he became a monk, learned the Bible stories by heart, and tried to paraphrase and note them down in verse. Then the Danes invaded Britain again at the close of the 8th century, and a good deal of religious poetry was destroyed. Some of Caedmon's poems have survived in a Wessex dialect. These include the paraphrases of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, and *Judith*, and also a poem about Christ and Satan. A poet in transition from the pagan to the religious way of writing, he was at his most exciting when writing about fighting, seafaring, and passions of strong men. Caedmon became 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. He was a scholar, knew Latin and religious literature, and wrote excellent poetry. The poems generally attributed to his authorship include, among others, *The Legend of St. Elena*, and *Christ. Christ*, happy in mood and alive with

the poet's creative talent, consists of three parts: the Virgin Birth, the Ascension of Christ, and the Day of Judgment.

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) and the other was *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, founded by King Alfred the Great, the earliest of its kind in Europe, which was continued after his death up to the early twelfth century. Although most of these is dull reading, they are of great value to historians. ²

Beowulf

The only organic whole poem to come out of the Anglo-Saxon period is *Beowulf*, an epic of well over 3,000 lines. It is important as the first major English poem and the greatest work of literature of the period. It is probably the greatest epic ever left by the ancient Germanic tribes, and the most ancient ever since the demise of the Greek and Roman literatures. The story takes place in Scandinavia, and there is no mention of England at all. The hero comes from Sweden, and performs his deeds in Denmark. The work was possibly brought over to England at the time of the Anglo-Saxon conquest, and was handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation until it was anonymously recorded in Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, in the 8th century. The existing manuscript of the poem is dated 10th century. ³

The poem tells the story of a 6th-century hero, Beowulf. It is basically a two-part narrative—Beowulf's fight with the sea-monsters Grendel and his mother in the first part (ll. 1-1798), and his killing a fiery dragon and his death in the second (ll. 1799-3182). The first part begins with the rise of the Danish nation (ll. 1-85) and continues with the present King Hrothgar, who is having trouble. His palace has been for twelve years harassed by a sea-monster, Grendel, who comes to grab and devour the king's people as he pleases, and no one seems to be his match (ll. 186-188). The king of Sweden sends over his nephew, Beowulf, with some retainers to help out. King Hrothgar welcomes his hero and spreads a feast for him (ll. 189-661). At nightfall Beowulf waits in the hall for the monster to show up and fights him by hand as the demon is vulnerable to no weapons of steel.

Beowulf, who has the strength of 30 men in his grip, tears off one arm from his enemy, and sends him howling away to his death in his haunted pool (ll. 662-835). The overjoyed king celebrates the victory (ll. 836-1250), but little expects that a greater danger is to appear and play havoc with his peace. That very night Grendel's mother, furious over her son's death, storms in to avenge him and kills several of the king's retainers. Beowulf follows her to her lair, dives in, fights with the she-monster, almost loses to her, but manages to kill her in the end with the help of a magic sword. He returns to the palace with the heads of the two demons (ll. 1251-1650) and receives gifts from the grateful king, "the gift-giver," at another celebration (ll. 1651-1798). In the second part of the poem, Beowulf goes back to Sweden, and then succeeds his uncle and his cousin as king and rules the country well for half a century (ll. 1799-2199). The last adventure he has in his old age is his fight with a fiery dragon. One day the fire-spitting monster comes and threatens to devastate the country. Beowulf goes with a servant to kill it, which he does, but not before he is fatally wounded. He dies for his people as an ideal king (ll. 2200-2820). The poem ends with his funeral (ll. 2821-3182).

In theme, *Beowulf* has little new to offer as another adventure story about a hero killing monsters to make the world safe for people, but the story is unique as a hybrid of fact with legend. It also serves to add testimony to a universal tradition that the humans always manage to get a sense of control over life with the help of their imaginative powers. Similar stories, basically myths, occur in the mythologies of different cultures such as Greek and Chinese. The Greek Heracles' 12 Herculean labors and the Chinese mythic hero Yi's feat of shooting nine of the ten suns down from the sky are just two prominent examples of the heroic exploits out of an amazing multitude in ancient mythologies. In a serious way, mythologies may have been man's religious beliefs and as such a means by which man makes the universe comprehensible and amenable to his control.

There are a few things that merit attention in the reading of the poem. First, the basically pagan story has an evident Christian overlay. For example, "God" or "Lord" is frequently mentioned as the omnipotent supreme being along with such Christian concepts as the belief in "future life," and Grendel is said to be a descendant of the errant biblical figure, Cain. This indicates that the story was put down on paper after Britain embraced Christianity, or some of the scribes of the

story must have been either Christianized or sensitive to Christian influence. Then, there is the use of “kennings.” A kenning is a kind of metaphor chiefly designed to appeal to people thinking in images and pictures and facilitate a process of attaining knowledge by guesswork. Kennings embellish the whole of *Beowulf*. For example, the sea is often “swan’s way” or “whale-path” or “whales’ road” or “pathway of sails”; a soldier is often a “shield-holder” or “battle-hero” or “sword-hero” or “spear-fighter”; a battle is a “spear-play” or “edge-play” or “crash of standards”; blood is “war-sweat”; the king is frequently a “gift-giver”; eyes are “head-jewels”; and the body is “flesh-coat” or “bone-chamber.” Such word combinations can easily call forth a physical response and effectively avoid juggling with abstract counters. Thirdly, there is the conspicuous occurrence of alliteration in versification. Almost every line in *Beowulf* is held by this pattern of sounds. Alliteration is by definition a succession of similar consonant sounds repeated at the beginning of successive words. It is good for rhythmic chanting effects, emphasis, and helping to memorize things, to name just a few of the purposes it can serve. Equally noticeable is the use of assonance, another popular sound pattern of repeating vowel sounds in successive words either initially or internally. Both alliteration and assonance serve the purpose of slowing down the reading and focusing attention. These Old English sound patterns have long been imbedded in English verse.

In addition, the narrator of the poem, the “I,” is clearly a minstrel, or “scop” or “gleeman.” The poem itself must have been brought over to Britain through the traveling minstrels in the form of an oral tradition. Another point of interest relates to the story’s digressive manner of narration. Whereas the story proper is simple and even slim, its length is swelled up by the digressions and interpolations, some of which can be irritatingly protracted (ll. 1063-1159; ll. 1632-1784; ll. 2349-2509). These are mostly either sung by the gleeman or appear as reminiscences of the hero and some other characters. They are not superfluous, however, as they offer a backdrop of manners, customs and mores, moral teachings, as well as events of historic interest such as the terrible scenes of the Northern battle-fields, the clashing of swords, the howling of the wolf, and the screaming of the eagles and the ravens. The whole poem was written in an elevated tone meant to be chanted for effect.

Medieval Literature: A Brief Introduction ⁴

The date that even a child of three in England is supposed to know is 1066, the year of the conquest of England by the French-speaking Normans. It was the year in which the Normans came under William the Conqueror, and the last Anglo-Saxon King Harold died with an arrow shot through his eye at the battle of Hastings. It was also the year that marked the beginning of the Middle English or Anglo-Norman period (1066-1400). The Norman line of kings sat on the throne for some 90 years and gave place to the Angevin kings (or the Plantagenets) in 1154. King Henry II and his descendants stayed in power for 245 years until they were superseded by the House of Lancaster in 1399 when the last of the Plantagenets, Richard II, was dethroned. This happened just one year before Chaucer died. Regarding this period there are a few occurrences of historic magnitude that should be kept in mind:

(1) The Establishment of the Feudal System: William the Conqueror did this effectively within a short space of time. He grabbed Anglo-Saxon land by force and gave it to his nobles and followers. These became lords of manors demanding allegiance from their Anglo-Saxon serfs and owed it to their immediate superiors. The hierarchy was a multi-tiered degradation with the king at the top keeping all the power in his hands. The relative peace that followed brought power and wealth and made the milieu congenial to the growth of art and literature.

(2) The 1381 Peasant Uprising: Within the system the nobles and the aristocrats had all the power and privileges while the serfs remained as wretched as ever. The widespread disaffection led eventually to the peasants' revolt in 1381 which was led by Wat Tyler of Kent and Jack Straw of Essex. 100,000 people marched on London, destroyed manor-houses, burnt court papers—records of their bondage, and demanded the abolition of serf slavery and a general pardon. Though it was eventually put down, serfdom died out gradually.

(3) The Completion of the *Domesday Book* (1086): Though undertaken as a tax-book or rent-roll to provide the king with an estimate of his resources, the *Domesday Book* serves also as a historical record of Anglo-Saxon institutions, customs, and way of life which would have otherwise been lost to time.