

## A Study of Anglo Saxon Literature: Reflections and Insights (500 to 1066)

Ekam Singh Pannu<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Disha Khanna<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, GNA University, Phagwara

<sup>2</sup>Deputy Dean, Faculty of Liberal Arts, GNA University, Phagwara

\*Email: - ekamsinghpannu@gmail.com

---

### Abstract

The paper examines and illustrates the Anglo-Saxon literature which is often regarded as the dawn of English literature. The writings of this period portray the love of freedom; responding to the environment, especially gaining a strong sense of strong religious beliefs, as well as a belief in fate; respect for femininity; and devotion to glory as the purpose of ruling in the life of all heroes. It dates back to the invasion of nations (tribes), including Angles, Saxons, and Jute from Germany, thus inhabiting Great Britain in the 5th century. This led to the emergence of the 'English nation' and Old English emerged as a combination of the original Briton language and the Germanic tribal language. The main aim of the paper is to show, by studying the episodes of this period comprehensively, how our literature has progressed from its original songs and simple stories to their current obsession with prose and poetry.

**Keywords.** Briton- Germanic tribal language, English nation, Freedom, Invasion, Old english

---

### 1. Introduction

From the majestic epic or heroic poem 'Beowulf', to the rise of prose under the direction of King Alfred, the dynamic evolution of English literature has become the subject of intensive analytical research, influenced by social, political, and economic diversity till the conquest of Normans in 1066.

The literature of this period falls naturally into two categories namely 'pagan' and 'Christian'. The first category represents the Anglo-Saxon poems that they may have come up with in the form of old sagas- the raw material from which the books gradually emerged on English soil; the latter represents the writings made under the guidance of the monks, after the old pagan religion disappeared, but while still holding on to human life and language. The whole of Europe, under pagan influence, was

transformed into the Christian continent when Saint Augustine arrived in 597. The Christian Ideals brought in abstract ideas, such as love, god, and the heaven, which is visible the English literature of the eighth century.

There were no written literature before the spread of Christianity and most of the literature was passed on orally by the 'scops', which were the essentials of the Anglo Saxon community. These 'scops' were famous for singing the heroic deeds of dead heroes. This led to the spread of poetry and much attention was paid to German heroism.

The Anglo Saxons did not bring any prose with them and the demand for prose was not felt until records were started to be kept. Prose developed with the Christianization of England. It was under the rule of King Alfred that the English prose was developed and translated most of the literature from Latin into old English.

of the literature from Latin into old English. He also published a periodical known as the Anglo Saxon chronicle, covering the history of the Anglo Saxon.

Anglo Saxon manuscripts

**i. Caesura-** In the old English language, caesura was used to denote the said punctuation in order to emphasize lines that were not considered droning and monotonous. It means to have a break in the middle of the line. Caesura was far more valuable to the ancient English text than to the Latin or Greek. Here is an example from the Beowulf lines where the basic form is a verse centered on something, with four stresses on each line separated by a caesura.

Hwæt! We Gardena || in gear-dagum,

þeodcýninga, || þrymgefrunon,

huðæþelingas || ellenfremedon.

(Behold! The Spear-Danes in days gone by,)

(And the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness,)

(We have heard of these princes' heroic campaigns.)

**ii. Alliterative verse-** A type of verse that uses alliteration as a main ornament to indicate the formation of underlying metrical structure, unlike other devices like rhyme. In the beginning all the poems written were written and distributed orally and much was never written down. Alliterative words replicate the same sound in a line or sentence. Example- Exeter riddles

Hwylc is hælepapæs horsc |

ondþæs hygecræftig

þætþæt mægeasecgan, | hwa mec on siðwræce,  
þonneicastige strong, |

stundumreþe, þrymful þunie, | þragumwræce

## 2. Important Work of Anglo Saxon Writers of the Anglo Saxon

Songs and poems in the oral form were more prominent than prose during the days of the Anglo Saxons. Various themes commemorating heroic deeds and religious abstract ideas not only influenced the common people but also paved the way for many modern Middle English texts. Based upon the subject matter available, the poems and songs are divided into (a) heroic poems (b) Lyric poems (c) Christian poems

### (a) Heroic poems

i. Beowulf- It is the first famous and historic poem, or hero in English literature whose author is unknown. The poem is about the heroic sacrifice of a hero known as Beowulf who travels from Sweden to Denmark to help the king, who was troubled by Grendle.

The poem has alliterative verses and stressed poetic lines. The lines are made up of two short halves, separated by a pause. No rhythm is used in the poem; but the musical effect was produced by giving each line half a set of characters with strong symbols. So each full line has four symbols, three of which usually start with the same sound or the same letter.

William Morris translated this poem as "The Tale of Beowulf" published in 1895 and J.R.R. Tolkien translated Beowulf in 1926 as "Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary in 2014".

ii. Widsith- It is one of the oldest poems whose author and composition date is unknown. This poem has 143 lines and survives only in Exeter book, an ancient English manuscript compiled in the late 10th century. The poem depicts a 'scop' about the exploration of people, kings and heroes in the heroic era of northern Europe. It expresses the nomadic life of a collector coming out of the

world to live here and there, according to his reward for his singing.

The poem is divided into three 'catalogs', called thulas. The first thula goes through the list of various famous emperors, contemporary and ancient (Caesar ruled the Greeks).

The poem refers to a group of people called Picingacynn, probably the first mention of the word viking (lines 47, 59, 80). It closes with a brief commentary on the importance and glory bestowed on poets such as Widsith, with many vivid reminders of the extraordinary generosity bestowed munificent generosity offered to tale-singers by patrons "discerning of songs."

### (b) Lyric poems

I. Deor's Lament- This poem is about a musician who has lost the favour of the Almighty and is thrown out, but he comforts himself by remembering the various examples of men who suffered more than him. The poem is composed of strophes, each one referring to a specific suffering hero and ending with a similar stop. . His sorrow passed away; so will mine'. "Deor' is much more poetic than Widsith', and is a perfect lyric of the Anglo-Saxon period. Here are the few lines from the poem:

*Weland for a woman knew too well exile.*

*Strong of soul that earl, sorrow sharp he bore:*

*To companionship he had care and weary longing,*

*Winter-freezing wretchedness. Woe he found again, again*

*After that Nithhad in a need had laid him-*

*Staggering sinew-wounds sorrow-smitten man!*

ii. Sea Forter- The poem 'sea forter' is divided into two parts. The first section discusses the complexities of marine life; but stronger than the difficulty is the subtle cry of the sea. The second

part is allegorical in nature, in which the troubles of seaman are symbols of the troubles of this life, and the call of the ocean is the call in the soul to be up and away to its true home with God. Sea farer is a man who travels and speaks of the solitude of the sea in contrast to the life and phenomenon of the earth. This poem has been translated extensively by Ezra Pound (USA) following a few selected lines to reflect the spirit of the poem:

*The hail flew in showers about me; and there I heard only*

*The roar of the sea, ice-cold waves, and the song of the swan;*

*For pastime the gannets' cry served me; the kittiwakes' chatter*

*For laughter of men; and for mead drink the call of the sea mews.*

*When storms on the rocky cliffs beat, then the terns, icy-feathered,*

*Made answer; full of the sea eagle forebodingly screamed, The eagle with pinions wave-wet*

*The shadows of night became darker, it snowed from the north;*

*The world was enchained by the frost; hail fell upon earth:*

*Was the coldest of grain. Yet the thoughts of my heart now are throbbing*

### (c) Christian poetry

The coming of Christianity did not mean just a new life with the leader of England; it meant the riches of a new language. The scope has now been replaced by the literary monk; and that monk, though living among the common people and speaking the English language, has the background of all Latin culture and literary resources. It relinquishes selfishness and darkness that are considered to be the eternal elements of love and the desire to procrastinate.

i. Caedmon- He was the first English poet, and wrote Caedmon's hymns in honor of the almighty. Paraphrase is the greatest work which is attributed to Caedmon. It is the story of Genesis, Exodus, and the part of Daniel, narrated in the glorious poetic language, with the power of understanding and thinking that often elevates you from interpretation to the realm of true poetry. Good poetry is about the life chosen by Caedmon and his beautiful creatures. It has been an aura of love and an aura of sorrow that causes a worldwide scourge. This paraphrase was discovered in the seventeenth century and is said to refer to Caedmon, and his name is still associated with it, although it is clear that the work belongs to more than one author. Caedmon was nicknamed Anglo Saxon Milton because they both wrote about the Almighty.

ii. Cynewulf- Well-known for his religious songs, and wrote poems such as “the fates of the apostors”, Juliana, Elene and Christ. The famous poem Dream of the rood (cross), is also named after him, in which a person speaks of a cross. He is the first person who singed his poems, the name was never plainly written but woven into verses. As it has always been the grace we seek and the affairs of mankind, which we can bring again, we can greet, for it is the kindness and joy of all men. When we talk about the consequences, it brings real happiness and sorrow that comes with a view to love. It is divided into 3 sections (a) the view of the cross (b) the discourses of the cross on the death of Jesus (c) the author gives his view of the cross. It is clear from Elene's epilogue that Cynewulf believed that his poetic ability came directly from the Almighty, who “opened the way for honor.” In his Christ II, Cynewulf writes the following:

“Then the One who created the world...

honoured us and gave us gifts... and also sowed and implanted in human minds many kinds of intellectual wisdom. One allows the recollection of wise poems, sending him a good understanding, by the spirit of his mouth. An intelligent person endowed with the art of wisdom can say and sing all kinds of things.”

iii. King Alfred and Anglo Saxon- King Alfred played a key role in shaping the first English prose. He is best known as a translator. And at a time when many men were satisfied with military honors, he began to learn Latin, to translate works that would benefit his people. His most important translation has four figures: Orosius's Universal History and Geography, a masterpiece in general history for hundreds of years; History of Bed , the pastors of Pope Gregory's Shepherds book ,designed especially for clergy; and Bothithius's Consolations of Philosophy, a favorite work of medieval philosophy.

### 3. The Conclusion

Old English literature that began with songs and poems depict the Anglo Saxons. The themes were acts of bravery in particular, honor of heroes, and love of home. Accent, alliteration, with a sudden break in the middle of each line gave their poems a kind of fighting rhythm. Poems are often sincere and painful, and full of superstition and religious sentiment. Anglo-Saxon literature portrays the love of freedom; responding to the environment, especially gaining a strong sense of strong religious beliefs, as well as a belief in fate; respect for femininity; and devotion to glory as the purpose of ruling in the life of all heroes.

### References

1. Wrenn, C. L. (1967). *A study of Old English literature*.

2. J. Earle. (1884). *Anglo-Saxon Literature*.
3. H. Magennis (2011). *The Cambridge Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literature*.
4. M. C. Amodio (2013). *The Anglo Saxon Literature Handbook*.
5. Aneirin, Y. (1988). Y Gododdin: Britain's Oldest Heroic Poem, edited and translated by A. O. H. Jarman, Gomer Press, vol. 3, pp. 2-66.
6. Bede. *Ecclesiastical history of the English people: a revised translation*. Translated by J.A. Giles, G Bell, 1907.
7. Bek-Pederson, Karen (2013). "Insular Celtic religion." *The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe*, edited by Lisbeth Bredholt Christensen, Olav Hammer, and David A. Warburton, Acumen Publishing, pp. 278-90.
8. "Beowulf." *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*, edited and translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 74-154.
9. Blair, J. (2000). *The Anglo-Saxon Age: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.