

Chapter One

Anglo-Saxon Literature

I. Introduction

1. Anglo-Saxon Conquest

In the ancient times, there were three tribes called Angles, Saxons and Jutes in the northern Europe. In the 5th century, they conquered Britain and settled down there. After driving the native people into the deep mountains of Wales and Scotland, they divided the whole island among themselves. Angles settled down in the east midland, and built the kingdom of East Angles; Saxons took the southern part of the island and set up some small kingdoms such as Wessex, Essex and Sussex; Jutes occupied the southeastern corner of the island. Gradually seven kingdoms arose in Britain. In the 7th century, these small kingdoms were combined into a united kingdom called England.

Angles, Saxons and Jutes who are usually known as Anglo-Saxons are the first Englishmen. The language spoken by them is called the Old English, which is the foundation of English language and literature. With the Anglo-Saxon settlement in Britain, the history of English literature began.

2. Characteristics of Anglo-Saxon Literature

Anglo-Saxon literature, that is, the Old English literature, was almost exclusively a verse literature in oral form. It could be passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. Its creators for the most part were unknown. It was given a written form long after its composition.

There were two groups of poetry in the Anglo-Saxon period. The first group was the pagan poetry represented by *Beowulf*; the second was the religious poetry represented by the works of Caedmon and Cynewulf.

In the 8th century, Anglo-Saxon prose appeared. The famous prose writers of that period were Venerable Bede and Alfred the Great.

II. Anglo-Saxon Poetry

1. Pagan Poetry

Beowulf

Beowulf is the oldest poem in the English language. It is the most important specimen of Anglo-Saxon literature, and also the oldest surviving epic in the English language. It consists of more than 3,000 lines. It had been passed from mouth to mouth for hundreds of years before it was written down in the 10th century or at the end of the 9th century. The main stories in the poem are based on the folk legends of the primitive northern tribes.

Hrothgar, king of the Danes, has built near the sea a mead-hall called Heorot. It is the most splendid hall in the world. Every night the king and his thanes gather there to feast and enjoy the songs of his gleemen. But later on misfortunes befall them. One night, after they have gone to sleep, a frightful monster called Grendel comes. He breaks into the hall, kills thirty of the sleeping warriors, carries off their bodies and devours them in his lair under the sea. The appalling visit speedily repeats, and fear and death reign in the great hall. The king's warriors fight at first, but flee when they find that no weapon can hurt the monster. The splendid mead-hall is left deserted and silent. For twelve winters Grendel's horrible raids continue, and joy is changed to mourning among the Danes.

Beowulf is the nephew of Hygelac, king of the Geats who live in Juteland, Denmark. He is a great hero, noted for his strength and bravery. When he hears that Hrothgar, the good friend of his uncle, is in great trouble, he determines to help the unhappy king. Then he crosses the sea with 14 soldiers to rid Hrothgar of the monster. When they get there, they are given a feast of welcome in the hall, and then they lie down in the hall for the night. At midnight, Grendel comes and kills one of Beowulf's soldiers. Beowulf has a hand-to-hand fight with him. Finally he wrenches off one of the monster's arms. Then the monster flees to his den and dies. The next night, Grendel's mother descends upon the hall to avenge her son. She carries away the king's dearest friend. In the morning, Beowulf chases her into her lair and slays her with a sword wrought by the giants hanging on the wall. When he finds the corpse of Grendel, he cuts off his head and brings it back triumphantly. The Danes award him many treasures, and Beowulf returns to his uncle happily.

Later on, Beowulf inherits the crown from his uncle and has reigned over his kingdom for 50 years. He is a nice king loved and respected by his people. But a disaster befalls his kingdom. A fire-spewing dragon that lives on a mountain begins to devastate the land of his kingdom because it thinks somebody has stolen a golden cup from the mountain cave that he has guarded for 300 years. Therefore the angry dragon determines to punish the people of the kingdom. It spews fire every day to burn the land and kill the people. To save his people from the disaster, with 11 chosen warriors the aged king goes to fight against the dragon. In the end, the dragon is killed, but Beowulf is severely wounded during the battle. He dies a heroic death. The poem ends with the scene of the grand funeral held for the hero by his people.

Writing Features of the Poem

1) It is not a Christian but a pagan poem, despite the Christian flavour given to it by the monastery scribe who wrote it down. It is the product of an advanced pagan civilisation. The whole poem presents to us an all-round picture of the tribal society. The social conditions and customs can be clearly seen in the poem. It helps us a lot when we study the primitive society of Europe. So the poem has a great social significance.

2) The use of strong stresses and the predominance of consonants are notable in the poetical lines. Each line is divided into two halves, and each half is made to have two heavy stresses.

3) The use of alliteration is another notable feature of the poem. Three stressed syllables of each line are arranged in alliteration, which makes the whole line even more emphatic.

4) A lot of metaphors and understatements are used in the poem. For example, the sea is called “the whale-road” or “the swan-road”; the soldiers are called “shield-men”; the chieftains are called “treasure-keepers”; the human body is referred to as “the bone-house”; God is called “wonder-wielder”; the monster is referred to as “soul-destroyer”.

2. Religious Poetry

Caedmon

Caedmon (610-680) is the first known religious poet of England. He is

known as the father of English songs. His life story is vividly described in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Caedmon, who was a humble and unlearned man, looked after cattle for an abbey on the Yorkshire coast. On the eve of the New Year, a feast was held in the abbey. When songs were called for, he stole out quietly, because he felt ashamed that he could contribute nothing to the amateur entertainment. Then he lay down in the cowshed to sleep. In his sleep, he heard a voice asking him to sing. "I can't sing," he said. "And that is why I left the feast and came here." "Nevertheless," said the mysterious voice, "You shall sing to me." "What shall I sing?" asked Caedmon. "Sing me the song of creation." Then Caedmon sang a song, which became his first poem and was named *The Hymn of Praise*. Later on, encouraged by the success of his first poem, Caedmon composed many other poems by using the biblical material.

Cynwulf and His Poems

Cynwulf lived in the early 9th century. Except the unknown composer of *Beowulf*, he is regarded as the greatest Anglo-Saxon poet. Of his life story we know very little. He was probably an ecclesiastic and a scholar. His name remained unknown until 1840.

He produced four poems: *Christ*, *Juliana*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, and *Elene*.

Of all these poems the most characteristic is *Christ*, which is a didactic poem in three parts: the first part celebrates the Nativity; the second part describes the Ascension; and the third part deals with the Doomsday.

Cynwulf took his subject matter partly from the church liturgy, but more largely from the homilies of Gregory the Great. The poem expresses a deep love for Christ and reverence for Virgin Mary.

III. Anglo-Saxon Prose

Prose literature arrived later than poetry. It did not show its appearance until the 8th century. There appeared three famous prose writers: Venerable Bede, Alfred the Great and Aelfric.

1. Venerable Bede

When we speak of the Old English prose, the first name that comes into our mind is Venerable Bede (673-735), who is the first scholar in English literature and has been regarded as the father of English learning. His works, over 40 in number, were written exclusively in Latin and covered the whole field of human knowledge of his day.

The most important of his works is *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The book not only tells us how religion was introduced and spread in England but also recounts some historical events of that period as well as some Anglo-Saxon mythological legends. It is in this book that Bede describes Caedman's legendary life story.

2. Alfred the Great

Alfred the Great (848-901), king of Wessex kingdom, is another important figure in prose writing of Anglo-Saxon period. During his reign, he tried every means to improve education by founding colleges and importing teachers from Europe. He was a well-known translator. He translated some important Latin works into English, among which, the most important is *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This book records the main happenings of the Anglo-Saxon period. It is the best monument of the Old English prose.

3. Aelfric

Aelfric (955-1010) was a clergyman. He wrote a large number of religious works in Greek and Latin. In his works he introduced a lighter, clearer and more musical prose, and the Old English prose was attaining high quality.

Exercise 1

I. Choose the best answers to complete the sentences.

- Anglo-Saxon conquest happened in the _____.
a. 5th century b. 7th century c. 9th century
- The first Englishmen are _____.
a. Angles and Saxons b. Angles and Jutes c. Anglo-Saxons
- The history of English literature began with _____.
a. Anglo-Norman conquest b. Anglo-Saxon settlement in Britain
c. the appearance of *Beowulf*
- _____ is the most important specimen of Old English literature.
a. *Historia Ecclesiastica* b. *The Hymn of Praise* c. *Beowulf*
- The main stories of *Beowulf* are based on the folk legends of _____.
a. the Bible b. the primitive northern tribes
c. Anglo-Saxons
- Beowulf* presents an all-round life picture of the _____.
a. feudal society b. tribal society
c. bourgeois society
- The use of _____ is a notable feature of *Beowulf*.
a. alliteration, metaphors and understatements
b. strong stresses and predominance of consonants
c. all of the above
- The first known religious poet in England is _____.
a. Caedmon b. Cynewulf c. Venerable Bede

9. When we talk about the Old English prose the first name that comes into our mind is _____.
- a. Alfred the Great b. Aelfric c. Venerable Bede
10. _____ is Alfred the Great's most important contribution to the Old English prose literature.
- a. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*
 b. *Historia Ecclesiastica* c. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

II. Check the statements T (True) or F (False).

- T F 1. After Anglo-Saxon conquest, seven small kingdoms appeared in Britain and later they were combined into a united kingdom named England.
- T F 2. Anglo-Saxon literature is exclusively a prose literature in oral form.
- T F 3. English poetry in the Anglo-Saxon period falls into two groups: non-religious and religious.
- T F 4. *Beowulf* is the oldest surviving epic in the English language.
- T F 5. *Beowulf* reflects how people in the tribal society fought against nature.
- T F 6. Caedmon's legendary life story is described by Bede in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.
- T F 7. *Historia Ecclesiastica* describes how religion was introduced and spread in England.
- T F 8. Venerable Bede is the first scholar in English literature and has been regarded as the father of English learning.
- T F 9. *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is the best monument of the Old English prose.
- T F 10. Cynewulf took his poetical subject matter partly from the church liturgy, but more largely from the homilies of Gregory the Great.

III. Explain the following terms.

1. Epic
2. Alliteration
3. Pagan poetry
4. Verse
5. Prose

IV. Answer the following questions.

1. What are the characteristics of Anglo-Saxon literature?
2. Briefly tell the story of *Beowulf*.
3. What are the writing features of *Beowulf*?
4. What is the theme of *Beowulf*?

Chapter Two

Medieval English Literature

I. Anglo-Norman Literature

1. Introduction

Norman Conquest

The Normans were originally a hardy race of sea rovers living in Scandinavia. In the 10th century, they conquered a part of northern France, which has been called Normandy, and settled down there. They adopted French as their language and embraced Christianity. They became renowned for their learning, their military prowess and their organising ability.

The Duke of Normandy William the Great was an able military leader and statesman. In the year 1066, he led the Norman army to attack England. The two armies met and fought at Hastings. Finally the English army was defeated. William and his men marched speedily into London and William became the King of England.

After the conquest, feudal system was established in English society. The new king ruled England with a high hand. He made a thorough job of taking over the country, and had everything inventoried. William saw himself as the owner of the country. He owned the land and everything in it. The feudal social structure in England was just like the pyramid in Egypt. At its top was the King William and below him were his noblemen such as barons and knights.

Social Conditions in the Feudal England

In the feudal society, class division was very obvious, and class contradictions became very sharp. The peasants, who had become serfs, toiled all the year round for the feudal landlords. The church and court were united to control and oppress the people. Those who dared to say anything against the feudal order would be put to death. Moreover, continuous wars with other countries and diseases added miseries to the English people. The government had no sympathy with the people. Instead, they enforced heavy taxes upon

the people. The poor peasants could not endure any longer, and they rose up to fight against the ruling class. The year 1381 witnessed a famous peasant uprising led by Wat Tyler and John Ball. Though it failed and its leaders were killed, it gave the ruling class a heavy blow.

The Influence of the Norman Conquest upon English Language and Literature

After the conquest, the Normans introduced the body of customs and ideals known as chivalry into England. The knightly code, the romantic interest in women, tenderness and reverence paid to Virgin Mary were reflected in literature.

With the coming of the Normans, the Anglo-Saxons sank to a position of abjectness. Their language was made a despised thing. French words of warfare and chivalry, art and luxury, science and law, began to come into the English language. Thus three languages existed in England in that period. The Normans spoke French, the lower classes spoke English, and the scholars and clergymen used Latin.

The literature of that period was varied in interest and extensive in range. The Normans began to write histories or chronicles to record their achievements. Most of the books were written in Latin or French.

The prevailing form of literature in the feudal England was the romance.

2. The Romance in the Anglo-Norman Period

Essential Features of the Romance

The romance was the prevailing literary form in the medieval period. It was a long composition, sometimes in verse and sometimes in prose, which described the life and adventures of a noble hero. Its essential features are the following:

- 1) It lacks general resemblance to truth or reality.
- 2) It exaggerates the vices of human nature and idealises the virtues.
- 3) It contains perilous adventures more or less remote from ordinary life.
- 4) It lays emphasis on supreme devotion to a fair lady.
- 5) The central character of the romance is the knight, a man of noble birth

and skilled in the use of weapons, who is commonly described as riding forth to seek adventures, or taking part in tournaments, or fighting for his lord in battle. He is devoted to the church and the king.

In romances we see an epitome of the English society in the medieval period. The romance, as a literary genre, prospered for about 300 years (1200-1500). It was written for the upper class, so it had little to do with the common people.

Romance Cycles

A large number of romances fall into three cycles or three groups according to the subject matters: the matter of Britain, the matter of France, and the matter of Rome.

1) The matter of France deals largely with the exploits of Charlemagne, usually known as Charles the Great, King of the Franks and Emperor of the West Empire. The famous romance of this group is *La Chanson de Roland*.

2) The matter of Rome deals with tales from Greek and Roman sources. Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.), King of Macedonia and conqueror of Greece, Egypt, India and Persian Empire is the favourite hero of this group. Besides this, Trojan War is also dealt with in this group.

3) The matter of Britain mainly deals with the exploits of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. The most interesting of all Arthurian romances are those of the Gawain cycle. The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the culmination of the Arthurian romances.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

It is a verse-romance of 2,530 lines, derived from Celtic legends. Here is the story:

On a New Year's Eve, King Arthur and his knights are holding a feast for the arrival of the New Year. A giant dressed in green enters the banquet hall on horseback with a battle-axe in his hand. This big man comes to challenge any knight in the hall to give him a blow with the battle-axe. The condition is that a return stroke be permitted a year later at the Green Chapel. No knight in the hall dares to accept the challenge. Seeing this, the King feels ashamed and angry, and he stands up and wants to accept the challenge himself. Just then, the King's nephew Gawain stands up and he takes up the challenge. With one

blow he sends the giant's head rolling through the floor of the hall. But the Green Knight, who is evidently a terrible magician, does not fall and die. He picks up his head and mounts his horse. He holds out his head and the ghastly lips warn Gawain to be faithful to his promise and to seek through the world till he finds the Green Chapel, where on the next New Year's Day, the Green Knight will meet him and return the blow.

A year has passed. Sir Gawain leaves his uncle to look for the Green Chapel and the Green Knight. He goes through a lot of hardships and adventures on the way. But he cannot find the chapel or the knight.

On the Christmas Day, he loses his way in a forest. Then he kneels down to pray to Mary for help. After the prayers, a great castle appears on the hill before him. He goes up to the castle and is warmly entertained by the host and hostess. Gawain is told that the Green Chapel is not far away. And he is asked to have a three-day rest in the castle.

Gawain stays there for three days. The host makes a compact with him. According to the compact, the host goes out hunting each day, and Gawain stays in the castle to entertain the beautiful hostess. In the evening they should exchange what they have got during the day.

On the first day, the host goes hunting, and Gawain stays in the castle. The beautiful hostess tries to tempt him to make love with her, but is refused by Gawain. Then she gives Gawain a kiss. When the host returns in the evening, he gives his guest the game he killed, and Gawain gives him the kiss he got from the lady. On the second day, Gawain also receives a kiss from the hostess, and he gives it back to the host when he comes back. On the third day, the lady not only gives Gawain a kiss but also offers him a ring. Gawain refuses to accept the ring. Then the hostess wants him to accept a magic green girdle and tells him that the girdle will protect him from any injury if he wears it. Gawain accepts the girdle and promises to the lady not to tell anybody about it. When the host comes back in the evening, Gawain only gives back the kiss he got from the hostess but he does not say anything about the girdle.

Three days later, the host takes Gawain to the Green Chapel. As soon as they get there, the host disappears and Gawain is left alone. He finds that the chapel is a terrible place. When he approaches it, he hears a terrifying sound. Obviously the green giant is sharpening his new axe. Then the Green Knight

comes out from the chapel with an axe, and Gawain offers his neck for his blow. Twice he is not injured at all, and the third blow of the axe falling upon his shoulder gives him a slight wound.

Then the Green Knight tells Sir Gawain that he is none other than the host of the Castle where Gawain stayed for three days. He says to Gawain that the first two blows of the axe did not injure Gawain because he was true to the compact and twice returned the kiss. The last blow wounded him because he concealed the green girdle. Full of shame, Gawain throws back the girdle and is ready to atone for his deception. But the Green Knight thinks that he has already atoned, so he lets Gawain keep the girdle as a gift from him.

When Gawain comes back to his kingdom, his story becomes widely known. In order to let his knights remember this shameful thing and draw a lesson from it, King Arthur gives a command to his knights that each of them wears a green girdle.

This romance is one of the most delightful old romances in any language. In form, it is an interesting combination of French and Saxon elements. It is written in an elaborate stanza combining metre and alliteration. At the end of each stanza there is a rhymed refrain.

II. English Literature in the Age of Chaucer

1. Introduction

Chaucer lived in the 14th century. In that century, England produced five main writers. The first one was William Langland, who wrote about social discontent in his works and preached the equality of men and dignity of labour. Wycliffe, the second one, was the greatest of English religious reformers and the first translator of the Bible. Gower, the third one, was a scholar and a literary man, who criticised the social evils in his works. The fourth one Mandeville was a traveller, who wrote about the wonders he had seen abroad. Chaucer, the last one and the greatest of them, was a scholar, a traveller, a businessman and a courtier, who shared all the stirring life of his age in his works. He was the representative writer of the century. Therefore, the 14th century is usually called the Age of Chaucer. Chaucer and Langland are two most important writers of the age.

2. William Langland

Introduction

William Langland (c.1330-c.1400) was born in the western midland of the country. He was educated in the school of a monastery at Malvern. After school he took minor orders, but never rose in the church. Then he moved to London and made a scanty living by singing masses, copying legal documents and doing other odd jobs. In 1362, he began writing his famous poem *Piers Plowman*, which was repeatedly revised. Three texts of the poem have been left to us, from which we see that it is written in the old alliterative verse: each line contains three alliterated words, two of which are placed in the first half, and the third in the second half.

Piers Plowman

The poem describes a series of wonderful dreams the poet-speaker has dreamed. Through these dreams, we see a picture of life in the feudal England. In the first dream, the author sees before him a fair field full of people. There are the rich and the poor, workers and idlers, nobles and merchants, unworthy priests, pardoners and jesters. All classes are there. The working people are working hard to plough and sow, but the idlers waste their labour fruit.

The speaker also finds all sorts of parasites. Among them are bishops and deacons, who, instead of preaching to their flocks, become the clerks of the law court. Rule of the Church is given to the cardinals who possess no cardinal virtues at all. There are also other religious idlers called friars, monks, hermits, and the like. All of them tell lies to the people, but a lot of money falls into their pockets.

In his dream, the speaker also notices a group of rats rush upon the scene. They discuss how to get rid of a court cat. One rat proposes that their enemy should be killed. But a mouse says that, even if the cat is killed, another will come in its place. So at last, all of the rats say: "Let that Cat Be." By using the fable story of the rats, the author exposes the ugly features of the ruling class and sums up the political situation of the time.

In the next dream, the speaker finds Lady Bribery, who is the incarnation of the corruption of the ruling class, and the enemy of Truth. Lady Bribery is going to be married to a man called False Fickle-Tongue. Through the allegory

of her marriage, those who are connected with the royal and ecclesiastical court are brought under the lash. The King is enraged at the news of the marriage. And Lady Bribery is asked by the King to wed Conscience. But when Conscience is called to the court, he flatly refuses to marry the lady and sets forth her whole manner of life. Conscience says that Bribery has corrupted the judges, and made it difficult for the poor to get justice. She releases the guilty, throws the just into prison, and hangs the innocent; and she is privy with the Pope, and lives secretly with priests as their concubine. When Lady Bribery is asked to defend herself against these charges, she makes an extremely cunning speech. She says that her intervention in all the relations of life is very necessary and important, and she makes the relationships between master and servant, King and subject, buyer and seller go well. Conscience exposes her fallacies point by point. He says there are two kinds of bribery, one the just reward for service, the other the price of misdoing. What labourers receive is not bribery, but wages; in merchandise, there is not bribery, but exchange.

Lady Bribery has no argument to offer but a misquotation from the Scriptures. She says Solomon declared that those who gave gifts won victory and obtained honour. But Conscience at once reminds her that she has left out the last part of the text: "He that giveth a gift shall have honour, but the soul of them that receive it is bound thereby." Finally, the King bids them to be reconciled.

Here we can see clearly that the poet tries to lash the corruption of the ruling class and the church with the whip of a satirist. And he also describes the hard life of the poor peasants and shows sympathy to them.

The next part of the poem describes the pilgrimage of the people in search for Truth.

In the confusion, Lady Holy Church appears. She encourages all the people to seek Truth, which is the best thing in the world. But the people say that they can never find the way without a guide, whereupon appears on the scene the hero of the poem, Piers the plowman. Piers the plowman is a simple and honest peasant. Before guiding the people on their pilgrimage, he says that he must first have his half-acre land ploughed. So he sets all the pilgrims to work in his field. He explains to the people that the best way to find Truth is to take part in labor. In this part, the author praises the dignity of honest labour. He considers that the hard-working farmers are the nearest to Truth.

Social Significance of *Piers Plowman*

Piers the plowman, the hero of the story, is not a representative of the poor peasants. He is one of the well-to-do peasants. He has no intention of upsetting the feudal order of society, and he accepts the existing social relations. This is the limitation of the poem. In spite of that, *Piers Plowman* remains a classic in popular literature. It praises the poor peasants, and condemns and exposes the sins of the oppressors. It was very popular in the 14th and 15th centuries. It played an important part in arousing the revolutionary sentiment on the eve of the uprising of 1381 headed by Wat Tyler and John Ball. It gives us a realistic social picture of medieval England.

Artistic Features of the Poem

- 1) *Piers Plowman* is written in the form of a dream vision. The author tells the stories under the guise of having dreamed them.
- 2) The poem is an allegory that relates truth through symbolism.
- 3) The poet uses indignant satire in his description of social abuses caused by corruption prevailing among the ruling classes, ecclesiastical and secular.
- 4) The poem is written in alliteration.

3. Geoffrey Chaucer

Introduction

Today Chaucer (c.1343-1400) is acclaimed not only as the father of English poetry but also as the father of English fiction. We are indebted to him for the most vivid contemporary description of England in the medieval period.

Chaucer's whole life can be divided into three periods. The first period, about 30 years, including his youth and early manhood, is the period of French influence. Chaucer's main works in this period were translations from French. Chaucer translated *The Romaunt of the Rose*, the most popular poem of Middle Ages, from French into English. The second period, about 15 years, covers Chaucer's active life as a diplomat and man of affairs. In



Geoffrey Chaucer

this period, Italian influence seemed to be stronger than the French. The major works by Chaucer in this period were adaptations from Italian writers. His masterwork of this period was *Troilus and Criseyde*. The third period, covering his last 15 years, is generally known as the English period. It is the period of Chaucer's richest development. His masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, one of the most famous works in all literature, fills the third period. In this great work, the author gives his reader a picture of English society in Middle Ages.

The Canterbury Tales

The whole book consists of a prologue and 24 tales. In the prologue, the author reveals his plan for writing this work, and also vividly describes some 30 tale-tellers.

The prologue tells us that one day in spring the author comes into the Tabard Inn in Southwark at the south end of London Bridge. Here he meets some 29 pilgrims, who are going to Canterbury. Then he joins this company, which includes all the classes of English society. At supper, the host of the inn suggests that in order to enliven the journey, each of the pilgrims tell two stories on the going journey and another two on the returning journey. The best storyteller shall be treated with a fine supper at general expense when they come back. The host will be the judge of the contest.

According to the number of persons in the company, 31, evidently the author planned to produce an immense work of 124 tales. Actually only 24 were written before Chaucer's death. These tales were written in various forms of medieval literature: romances of knights and ladies; folk tales; animal fables; stories of travels and adventures; legends, allegories and so on. Twenty-two tales were written in verse form and only two in prose form.

The prologue comprises a group of vivid sketches of typical medieval figures. The 30 pilgrims depicted by Chaucer represent all classes of the English feudal society, except the royalty and the poorest peasants. They range from the knight and squire, and prioress, through the landed proprietor and wealthy tradesman, down to the drunken cook and humble plowman. There are also a doctor, a lawyer, monks of different orders, nuns, priests, a summoner, a sailor, a miller, a carpenter, a yeoman (a small independent farmer), and an Oxford scholar. In the centre of the group is the Wife of Bath, the owner of a large cloth-making factory.

Every figure is drawn with the accuracy of a portrait. The portraits of the 30 pilgrims supply a miniature of the English society in Chaucer's time. Looking at the picture gallery, we know at once how people lived in that era. Therefore, Gorky, the Russian writer, regarded Chaucer as "the founder of English realism".

Let's see how Chaucer draws the portrait of the Wife of Bath.

The Wife of Bath is the owner of a cloth-making factory, who is light-hearted, merry, somewhat vulgar, and exceedingly talkative. Somebody in the party urges her to talk about her husband, and she then tells the whole story of her married life. She has married five husbands and she expects one or two more. She says that she has always been able to master her husband and rule the house. Sometimes she manages it by making her husband jealous, sometimes she manages it because the husband is old and she is young and pretty. There is only one husband whom she cannot easily dominate. He treats her badly. But she gets the upper hand of her husband by provoking him to beat her and then pretending to be dead. By using this trick she easily gets all the property into her hand. For all she has done she justifies herself by quoting texts from the Bible in the most extraordinary way and with the most extraordinary comments. Thus we see a very vivid sketch of a woman of the middle class, and a colourful picture of the domestic life of that class in Chaucer's day.

The tales that the pilgrims tell are well suited to their various characters. Among the 24 tales, the best ones are the tales told by the Knight, the Pardoner, the Nun's Priest and the Wife of Bath.

① The Knight's Tale

Palamon and Arcite are two young Theban knights. They are cousins and sworn-brothers. In a battle, both of them are found wounded on the battlefield. So they are taken prisoners by the Duke of Athens. One day from the prison window they behold the fair maid Emily, who is the sister-in-law of the Duke. Both of the young men fall desperately in love with the lady. For this reason their friendship ruptures. To decide who should marry the lady, a grand tournament is held.

Arcite, who has prayed to God of war, Mars, wins. But unfortunately he is thrown off the horse and dies, thus losing the lady in the very hour of his triumph. Palamon, who has prayed to Venus, Goddess of love, marries Emily

after much sorrow.

The subject matter of the story was borrowed from Boccaccio's tales. It is one of the best tales in the book.

② The Pardoner's Tale

Once upon a time, there are three rioters in Flanders, who do nothing every day but drink, gamble and play cards and dice day and night. One day while they are sitting in a tavern drinking, they see some men carrying a coffin pass by. They are told that Death has killed many people in the village nearby. The three rioters decide to find Death in order to slay him. So they set out to look for Death. On their way to the village they meet an old man who directs them in their search. But finally instead of meeting Death, they find under an oak tree a heap of golden florins. In order to celebrate the happy finding the youngest is sent to town to buy bread and wine. While the other two are waiting for him, they make a plan to murder him when he comes back. When the youngest arrives in town, an evil idea comes into his mind. He thinks if he puts his two companions to death he will possess the heap of gold. So he buys some poison and puts it into the wine. When he comes back, his two companions kill him just as they have planned. Then the two murderers sit down to eat and drink. Both die of poison. At last all the three rioters find Death as they wished.

③ The Merchant's Tale

The 60-year-old Baron January has become blind; his young wife May and her lover take advantage of his blindness to make love in a tree. At that moment, Pluto restores the old man's eyesight, and he sees what is happening before him. But realising that nothing can be done about it, the Baron accepts his wife's statement that his eyes have deceived him.

Social Significance of *The Canterbury Tales*

In his masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer gives us a true-to-life picture of the society of his time. Taking the stand of the rising bourgeoisie, he affirms man's right to pursue happiness and opposes the dogma of asceticism preached by the church. As a forerunner of humanism, he praises man's energy, intellect, quick wit and love of life. His tales expose and satirise the social evils of his time. They condemn the degeneration of the noble, the heartlessness of the judge and the corruption of the church.

Living in a transitional period, Chaucer is not entirely devoid of medieval prejudices. He is religious himself. There is nothing revolutionary in his writing, though he lived in a period of peasant uprising. When praising man's spirit to pursue earthly happiness, he sometimes likes to crack a rough joke and paint naturalistic pictures of sexual life. These are Chaucer's weak points. But these are, however, of secondary importance compared with his achievement as a great poet and storyteller.

Features of Chaucer's Writing

Chaucer uses vivid and exact words. His poetry is full of vigour and swiftness. Chaucer's great contribution to English poetry is that he introduced from France the rhyming couplet of iambic pentameter (which was later called the "heroic couplet") to English poetry, and used it in his masterwork. This poetical form gradually took the place of the old alliterative verse form in Chaucer's day. Chaucer is the first great poet who wrote in the current English language. He wrote his poetry using the east midland dialect of England, the dialect of London. So he did much in making the dialect of London the foundation of modern English speech, and in establishing English as the literary language of the country.

Chaucer's style in *The Canterbury Tales* is remarkably flexible. His prose, like his vocabulary, is easy and informal. Chaucer is a great satirist, but his satire is not bitter when he pokes fun at the foibles and weaknesses of people.

III. English Literature in the 15th Century

The 15th century was a period of general unrest. People's attention was drawn to a series of wars, and many nobles who had been patrons of arts and literature were killed on the battlefield. The continuous wars greatly impeded the development of literature. So the 15th century has traditionally been described as the barren age of English literature.

Yet in this barren age, popular literature became very prosperous. There were ballads, lyrics, popular dramas and so on. Popular ballads became the most important form of English literature in this century. The appearance of a large number of ballads made the 15th century the spring tide of English

ballads. This century produced one important writer whose name is Thomas Malory.

1. English and Scottish Ballads

Popular Ballads

Popular ballads are originally dance songs. They are little stories in verse form, which can be sung or recited by the common people. The origin of the English and Scottish ballads is obscure. Usually they are anonymous, and are handed down orally for many generations. They are simple and crude in story and highly condensed and dramatic in presentation. In the 15th century, there were several kinds of ballads: historical, legendary, fantastical, lyrical and humorous. Popular ballads were found all over Europe in that period, but a particularly fertile soil was the border area between England and Scotland, for once many bloody battles were fought between the English and Scots there.

Ballads of Robin Hood

The most famous cycle of English ballads centres on the stories of a legendary outlaw called Robin Hood. In English history, Robin Hood is a partly real and partly legendary figure. The ballad stories tell us that he lives during the reign of Richard I. He is the leader of a band of outlaws who live in a big forest. They often attack the rich, and wage war against bishops and archbishops, but they help the poor people. Therefore Robin Hood and his followers are constantly hunted by the sheriffs. In the people's mind, Robin Hood becomes the symbol of rebellious and justice. So a lot of ballads dealing with his adventures and rebellious spirit were composed in this period to express people's love and praise of Robin Hood and his men.

2. Thomas Malory

Introduction

Thomas Malory (1405-1471) is the only important prose writer in the fifteenth century. He wrote an important book called *Le Morte d'Arthur* (*The Death of Arthur*) in a prison cell. The charges against him ranged from extortion, robbery and cattle rustling, to "waylaying the Duke of Buckingham".

It is possible, however, that few of the crimes were real. He was, after all, a Lancastrian in a time of Yorkist ascendancy, and the law is ever a ready weapon to those in power. In fact, when two general amnesties were declared by King Edward VI in 1468, Malory, unlike the other prisoners in jail at the time, was not set free. This may indicate that Malory had been singled out as a particular enemy by the Crown because of his opposing role in the Wars of the Roses.

Le Morte d' Arthur

Malory's tale begins with the mysterious birth of Arthur and ends with his equally mysterious death. The major concern is with the adventures of Arthur and his famous Knights of the Round Table. His knights have fought many battles and won a lot of glory, all of which is a credit to the name of King Arthur.

Near the end of the story, however, the tide of good fortune turns. Launcelot, one of Arthur's knights, falls in love with Arthur's queen, Guinevere, and the lady returns his love. One by one the other knights become discontented, selfish, or disillusioned. Thus the kingdom is weakened, and is attacked by the force under Sir Mordred, Arthur's treacherous nephew. Ultimately it goes down in defeat. Arthur is borne away on a barge by three mysterious ladies of the lake.

Le Morte d' Arthur was written in a time of transition. The feudal order was collapsing. By the time Malory began writing his story, soldiers were fighting with gunpowder, a middle class of tradesmen was arising, and the practices of chivalry were being superseded by a new aristocratic code. Malory, in a desire to escape the disorder and uneasiness of his day, tried to recapture the lost ideals of the romantic past as recounted in his tale of noble kings, adventurous knights, and damsels in distress.

This book is very important in English literature, for its Arthurian materials give later writers sources of Arthurian stories.