

## From Beowulf to Canterbury Tales: The Evolution of Literary Genres from Old To Middle English

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### Abstract:

The evolution of literary genres from Old English to Middle English marks, therefore, language, culture, and storytelling tradition changes in England from Anglo-Saxon to later Medieval times. Beowulf is the Old English epic par excellence, and it is steeply integrated within oral-formulaic tradition to have heroic narratives of Germanic legend or pagan value, later Christianized through alliterative verse; it bears witness to the priority of orality within the scop's preserving cultural memory. The Canterbury Tales, on the other hand, stand as a marker in Middle English literature. It is a collection of 24 tales or stories, all of which represent various kinds, that are told by pilgrims of diverse social classes who travel together to pilgrimage sites. By its use of vernacular Middle English, Chaucer legitimized vernacular Middle English as a literary language that freed it from the domination of Latin and French; nor can we deny its more well-structured narrative, which also takes into account contemporary societal issues, getting influences both from courtly and ecclesiastical traditions. This movement showed the progression from more heroic and oral epics to more complex narratives, and the transition marks an important era in medieval England, showing how changing the language and culture can alter the whole aspect of these developments in literature.

**Keywords:** story telling; heroes; religion; language; travel

### INTRODUCTION

Beowulf; an epic poem from 975-1025 AD, chronicles the heroic tradition of Old English literature. The deeds of Beowulf, a hero of the Geats, are told as he battles the monster Grendel and a dragon. Themes include valor, loyalty, and fate, with the intertwining of pagan and Christian thought. Old English literature was characteristically alliterative and oral in character. Works were sharply influenced by Germanic legends and tales from the Bible.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 brought in French influences that led to a fusion of the Anglo-Saxon and Norman traditions. This time saw a gradual transition from Old English to Middle English characterized by the regional dialects of Old English and the use of the vernacular in literature.

## **METHOD**

This qualitative approach aims to provide an in-depth picture of how linguistic, cultural, and social contextual factors shaped the evolution of English literary genres from the Anglo-Saxon period to the Middle Ages.

## **DISCUSSION**

Beowulf is one of the two stage-setting works for this transformation; the other is Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. They demonstrate the evolution of literature from oral heroic epics with pagan and Germanic traditions to sophisticated narratives in the vernacular that address contemporaneous social realities.

### **Old English Literature and Beowulf**

Beowulf was composed sometime between 975 and 1025 AD, which puts it in the first glory of the Old English epic. It encompasses the heroic traditions of Anglo-Saxon England, narrating the feats of Beowulf, a Geatish hero who contests Grendel and a dragon. Valor, loyalty, and fate—some basic themes of the poem—intertwine the pagan heroic ideals and the emerging Christian ones, thus giving a reflection of that era's cultural syncretism. It is composed in alliterative verse and oral-formulaic style, which gives evidence for the fact that at that time orality was the mainstay in preserving cultural memory through the scop-poet-story-tellers.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 became a watershed, introducing the French linguistic and cultural influences that, in gradual ways, modified English literary production. From there, Old English began its transformation into the Middle English vernacular, characterized historically by the division of regional dialects and enriched lexicon with Norman French words. Such a general development in language would largely allow for the formation of new artistic modes and themes, upon which Chaucer then exercised mastery.

### **The Middle English literary example and The Canterbury Tales**

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) is a quintessential Middle English work tending to shake the very ground of English literature, giving recognition to vernacular languages as worthy of being developed into an artistically serious literary language. The very essence of Chaucer's initiation of writing in the Middle English language was daring and great, for at that time Latin and French dominated formal and

literary expression; thus he contributed much to satisfy the desire for writing artsy narratives in English.

The present work is structured like a frame narrative set in the late Middle Ages: a motley band of pilgrims from various strata of society join each other on the pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury, and storytelling arises out of that situation. With this structure, Chaucer can in fact present us with 24 full-fledged tales of virtually any sort in almost any mood-any mood-from frivolous to grave; Chaucer includes them all with a heavy dose of social commentary. This affirmative design allowed social commentaries on establishing relationships and creating communities. There is thus a broad contrast between the manner of interaction present among these pilgrims and the formal variety employed-from rhyme royal and rhyming couplets to prose-implying the complexity of the medieval stage with respect to English society and its literary world.

Chaucer's tales are thus immediately relevant to social tensions but analyze human emotions with a subtlety of their own, arising from the various traditions concerning courtly and ecclesiastical societies. The psychological animation of his characters becomes ever so revealing about the social roles that determine their actions and intentions, a contrast to earlier medieval literature where the focus was non-psychologizing. The Tales pose therefore as an evolving set of narratives from an earlier epoch seen where Contemporary into a carefully made one in written form, thus responding to the challenges posed by the new cultural context.

This shift from *Beowulf* to *The Canterbury Tales* reflects a larger cultural shift in medieval England. From heroic, oral epic rooted in pagan and Germanic tradition, it moved to a more varied literary tradition embracing vernacular, social complexity, and narrative diversity. Such change indicates the change from Old English to Middle English with changing social setups post-Norman Conquest.

The transition from almost entirely oral to written literature was an important turning point in the preservation and dissemination of stories. While *Beowulf* preserves a heroic past through oral tradition, *The Canterbury Tales* captures the multifaceted realities of 14th-century England through written vernacular storytelling, which entertains as well as offers social critique.

## CONCLUSION

The passage from Beowulf to The Canterbury Tales defines an important frame in the history of English literature, indicating how variations in language and culture result in changing literary genres and narrative modes. The diffusion of Chaucer's work in elevating Middle English transformed English literature, while it, in turn, reflected upon and influenced the social and cultural life of medieval England. This prism captures the vibrant movement between language, culture, and literature in giving direction to the medieval English literary canon.

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