UNIT 1: THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

UNIT STRUCTURE

1.1 Learning Objectives
1.2 Introduction
1.3 The Anglo-Saxons
1.4 Major Literary Forms
1.5 Let us Sum up
1.6 Answers to Check Your Progress
1.7 Further Reading
1.8 Model Questions

1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the Anglo-Saxon period in a detailed manner
- explain the major literary forms of the Anglo-Saxon period
- explore some of the major literary works by the Anglo-Saxon writers
- gain an idea on the development of English literature starting from the Anglo-Saxon period

1.2 INTRODUCTION

The Anglo-Saxon period in the history of English literature covers the period from the middle of the 5th century CE to the Norman Conquest of 1066. Around 450 CE, three major Germanic tribes, the Jutes, the Saxons and the Angles entered the British Isles. These invaders gradually adapted to the local culture of the Celts whom they had displaced, leading to the production of a language that came to be known as Old English. Later invaders from Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the Scandinavian Vikings, made different parts of England their home and led to further modification

of the language. These Germanic Anglo-Saxon tribes embraced Christianity in the 7th century and developed a literature in the written form. This literature is known as Anglo Saxon literature or Old English literature.

1.3 THE ANGLO-SAXONS

Before we proceed with our discussion on Anglo-Saxon literature we need to know a little about the history of the people that produced this literature. What were the Anglo-Saxons like? What was their society like? How did they earn their livelihood? Hence, we shall first learn about the way of life of the Anglo-Saxons so that we can better understand the people that created what we today know as Anglo-Saxon literature.

Anglo-Saxon literature is a synthesis of many different linguistic groups that successively occupied or conquered the British Isles. The earliest were the Celts which consisted of the Gaels and the Britons. The Gaelic people did not exert much influence on English literature in the early period as they settled in the Scottish Highlands. The Britons inhabited the present region of Wales and England and were subsequently conquered by the Anglo-Saxons. However, many of them intermarried with the conquerors and influenced Anglo-Saxon literature. The influence of the Britons on Anglo Saxon literature can be said to consist of two main characteristics: the first is a vigorous emotionalism exhibiting vivacity, love of novelty, bravery, yet an impractical nature. The second characteristic is the exhibition of a delicate sensitivity to beauty and fantasy. These characteristics are clearly depicted in the story *Kilhwich and Olwen*. Here, we find beautiful descriptions of the hidden charms of nature like hills, forests, and the pleasant breeze, the flowers in the meadow, and graceful young maidens and youth. The characteristic imagery of the literature of the Britons range from different hues of rich colour to descriptions of whatever took their fancy like attractive objects, sights, sounds, movement and the like, which were all woven into supernatural romances or fantastic tales. The imagery conjured up by these tales probably inspired the fairy scenes of Shakespeare and the lyrical poetry of Tennyson in the later period.

In the first century CE, the Romans conquered the British Isles and introduced Roman civilisation and later, Christianity to the Britons of the towns and plains. With them, came the Latin language and for nearly three hundred years, it was the language of the ruling elite. However, the Romans do not appear to have influenced Old English literature. By the beginning of the fifth century, harassed by the invading Anglo-Saxons, the Romans abandoned Britain and by the middle of the fifth century, the Jutes, Angles and Saxons who came in successive bands, established permanent settlements on the island. These Anglo-Saxon tribes were barbarians and led a semi-pastoral life and basic agricultural practies.

They were war-like and many earned their livelihood through piracy, and looting and pillaging. By nature, they were also ferocious, cruel, strong, courageous and deeply loyal to their chieftains or kings, and comrades. These qualities found a strong expression in their literature. The Anglo-Saxon conquest of the British Isles took place over a period of nearly 150-200 years. While the earlier invaders initially settling on the eastern and southern shores, they gradually made in-roads into the interior of the island by defeating the early Roman invaders. In course of time, the Angles settled in the east and north, the Saxons in the south, and the Jutes, who were numerically smaller, in the region of Kent. They established separate kingdoms which were often at war with one another as well as with the Britons. The Britons tried in vain to resist the onslaught of the Anglo-Saxons and by the seventh century, the Anglo-Saxons occupied almost the entire region that is present day England.

The Anglo-Saxon conquest virtually destroyed the earlier Celtic and Roman civilisation. They burnt cities, slaughtered the inhabitants and occupied the land. Establishing themselves as masters of the farmlands, these barbaric warriors were surrounded by bondsmen and slaves drawn from among the defeated people. It is believed that many Britons were kept alive as slaves and wives. In course of time, the Anglo-Saxons transformed into a race of farmers and developed a flourishing trade with the European continent. Towards the end of the sixth century, Christian missionaries from Rome had arrived and in 597 CE Saint Augustine landed in Kent and

converted the kingdom. By the middle of the seventh century, after fierce fighting, Christianity had been established in most of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms located in the southern half of the island. In the northern part, in Ireland, meanwhile, Christianity had already been established by simple missionaries although it was not patronised by Rome. The Christian faith propagated by the Romans, brought with it imperial architecture, music, education, and the zeal which over time, would establish the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church in the Western world. When the king of Northumbria, the most powerful Anglican kingdom, decided in favour of the Roman church as against the Irish, it resulted in the supremacy of the former over the island of Britain. This had far-reaching consequences in the medieval period when a common religion bound Britain with Rome, resulting in spiritual efflorescence. This was mainly due to the establishment of a network of monasteries that became centres of learning and literature.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What is Anglo-Saxon Literature?

Q2. What are the two main characteristics of the influence of the Britons on Anglo-Saxon Literature?

Q3. What were the far-reaching influences when a common religion was established in Britain?

1.4 MAJOR LITERARY FORMS

Some of the major literary forms are as discussed below:

Anglo Saxon Poetry:

Early Anglo-Saxon poetry exhibits pagan characteristics as it was composed before the conversion to Christianity. It consists of epic poems and ballads of fierce warriors that reflect the life of the Anglo-Saxons before they conquered the British Isles. The Anglo-Saxons believed in the efficacy of magical charms and their ballads developed through story-telling among groups when they probably retold and re-enacted achievements in hunting or war. These popular stories were passed down orally from one generation

to the next. The professional minstrels or bards known as *scops* or *gleemen* who were adept storytellers had popularised these ballads of brave deeds by wandering from village to village interacting with different tribes.

Their storytelling was often accompanied by the harp. They also began to compose formal poetry and many minstrels also entertained at the courts of the barbarian chieftain or king or warriors during feasts with tales of heroes and battles and the achievements of their patron. Although, the majority of these popular ballads have been lost over time, some of them fired the popular imagination and developed into formal epic poetry. Very often, the minstrels composed these epics by stringing together different ballads that deal with the exploits of a single hero or with a single event. One of the most popular surviving epic is that of *Beowulf*.

Beowulf consisting of about three thousand lines is one of the most well-known Anglo -Saxon epic poems. This poem had its origins in the European continent and was carried to England in the form of ballads by the Anglo-Saxons. Portions of this epic are of Scandinavian origin probably brought to England by Danish or Norwegian pirates. It developed into a formal epic poem during the seventh and eighth century. This powerful poem narrates the story of the hero Beowulf who comes from the sea to the aid of King Hrothgar and delivers him from the monster Grendel. Following this, King Hrothgar and his people are confronted with the wrath of Grendel's mother who seeks revenge. Ultimately, the latter is also killed by Beowulf. A triumphant Beowulf returns home and his heroic deeds are rewarded by his tribe, who make him their king. However, his kingdom is threatened by a fire-breathing dragon. Beowulf dies a hero's death while killing the beast and saving his people from harm.

The picture presented in *Beowulf* of the life of the upper caste warriors belonging to the northern Germanic tribes is incomplete. One sees only glimpses of the later period of barbarism of these tribes in England and the larger continent. It is nevertheless an interesting description. War, feasting and hunting seem to be the chief occupations of Hrothgar and his lot, if the depictions by the poets/bards of his life are anything to go by. The poem maintains a grim and sombre mood throughout its deployment and very

rarely betrays traces of delight in the beauty that the world has to offer. For the greater part of the poem, hardy satisfaction at performing well as a warrior and protector with a fierce natural environment providing impediments along the way, take centre stage.

Beowulf is hardly the correct place to look at for finer artistic graces and the structural subtleties characteristic of later literary periods. Thus one finds more dramatisation than clarity in the narrative. The characters are mostly two dimensional, tailored by the poet(s) to suit the demands of an audience that was presumably not very perceptive or attentive to the minutiae of details. But the sheer power and virile barbarism that the epic poem exudes make it a memorable one, especially if one does not forget that it was the product of a long period of poetic evolution.

In the kingdom of Northumbria, located in present Yorkshire and southern Scotland, the capital city York and its various monasteries became the chief centres of learning and culture in Western Europe. The Anglo-Saxon poetry produced in this region exhibits like *Beowulf*, a certain Pagan spirit. Its other characteristics are ingenious and skilfully developed riddles in verse form, representing an early form of popular literature like the ballads and charms. The surviving specimens of Pagan lyrical poems are pensively melancholic- dealing with the harsh and tragic aspects of life, and the power of oceans and storms, the inevitability and dreariness, banishment and the separation of friends. Some Celtic influence is discernable in the common tender notes of pathos. The majority of this Anglo-Saxon poetry of the Northumbrian period was the product of the Christian monasteries or under monastic influence.

The earliest Christian writer was Caedmon, who rendered portions of the Bible in Anglo -Saxon verse, towards the end of the seventh century. Another scholar was Bede, a Christian monk whose forty Latin prose-works summarised most of the knowledge of his time. Cynewulf was another important poet whose religious poetry in the Anglo Saxon language deals with Christ, Christian apostles and heroes. Thus, much of the Anglo Saxon prose and poetry of the Northumbrian period display the lingering of the Pagan heritage and consist of powerful narratives of sea voyages, battles,

acts of vigour and passion and an adventurous life. The Christian influence is seen in the religious beliefs of Providence and dependence on God and Christ, where the latter replaced the kings of old.

Anglo-Saxon Prose, The West Saxon Prose Period :

This period is marked by the attacks on the Anglo-Saxons by the non-Christian Danes or Northmen who hailed from the Scandinavian Peninsula and the neighbouring coast. In the ninth century, the Danes repeatedly attacked and looted England, conquered Northumbria, destroyed the churches and monasteries, resulting in an almost complete destruction of learning. King Alfred (871-901 CE) of Wessex, the region of the West Saxons, tried to negotiate peace by ceding to the Danes the entire north-eastern part of the island. Following the restoration of peace and stability, Alfred worked hard to restore learning in his kingdom. He himself translated manuals of history, philosophy and religion from Latin into Anglo Saxon. His greatest work was the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, a series of annals starting with the Christian era, kept at various monasteries that recorded the most important historical events mainly of England up to the eleventh century. These chronicles are characterised by brief accounts bereft of any details except for the spirited narrative that deals with the exploits of Alfred, where the narrator is sometimes roused to the verse form. The two important extant pieces of Anglo Saxon poetry of the West Saxon period were written in the tenth century. These describe the two great battles against invading Northmen at Brunanburgh and Maldon.

The West Saxon period has produced literature of relatively little significance. Most of the writing that survives this period is generally didactic and riddled with exaggerated symbolism, in the form of religious prose – hagiographies, sermons, biblical and monastic literature. Meanwhile, several wars ravaged the country. Post Alfred's death, within fifty years, his descendants had managed to seize back England from the Danes (most of whom till the land today comprise a large segment of the 'English' race). However, towards the close of the tenth century, the Danish again emerged from the Baltic lands, unleashing death and destruction upon the Anglo-Saxons. By the eleventh century, many had entered the Christian fold. And

in the beginning of the twelfth century, Canute a Christian Danish king began to rule over the region (for twenty years). In such times, understandably little of literature could flourish.

Thus, early Anglo-Saxon literature was the product of different racial groups that exhibited Pagan, as well as, Christian influences. The Norman Conquest at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 marks the end of this early Anglo Saxon literature which would now enter into a new phase after the death of King Harold, the last Anglo-Saxon ruler. William of Normandy brought fresh new influences from France, which replaced the earlier Pagan traits, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Anglo Norman Literature:

The Norman Conquest put an end to serious literary works in Old English language and gave the rise to Anglo-Norman literature, commonly dated between 1100/1200 and 1350s, and considered to be the first phase in the development of English literary phenomena during the Middle Ages. The starting point is taken to be the Hastings Battle of 1066, marking the beginning of the Norman Conquest, and for almost two centuries the further development of English society, culture, and literature was dependent on French politics, French culture, French literary productions, and French language.

With the Norman Conquest, 'French' emerged as the language of the elite. Initially, Norman and Latin were the official languages, also permeating all of literature. However, by 1350, English was re-established as the dominant court language, and consequently that of courtly literature. With this adoption, the native language flourished in the form of varied literature. Literary writings provided both instruction and amusement.

Much of the Anglo-Norman literature is given to experimentation, with poetry emerging as the most prevalent form- encompassing themes on divinity, history, as well as, science. Layamon's *Brut* is a remarkable text produced at this time. Other significant works include narrative poems like "Sir Gawain and the Greene Knight", and lyric poetry like "Blow, Northerne Wynd". Christian symbolism pervaded most of these texts. Anglo-Norman

poetry is functionally categorised into three major groups: chronicles, religious and didactic verse, and the romances.

The verse chronicles are marked by ingenuity in style, where romances were passed off as works of history. *Brut* is marked by its use of assonance, rhyme and similes. Robert of Gloucester's untitled verse chronicle amounted to almost twelve thousand lines. Robert Mannyng of Brunne wrote, *The Story of England* in 1338, which though highly unoriginal, is known for its alexandrine couplets. With the founding of several abbeys during this period in time, religious and didactic poetry flourished, mostly written in French, some in English. *The Ormulum* by Orm, an Augustinian monk, was intended to explain to "the ignorant" the Gospel and its interpretations. The much popular debate-verse *The Owl and the Nightingale* was written in octosyllabic couplets, and draws from the classical eclogue of Virgil and Theocritus. The poem is said to be an allegory of the clash between pleasure and asceticism – symbolised by the nightingale and the owl respectively. It has also been seen as an allegory for the clash of literary forms of courtly love poetry and religious didactic poetry.

William of Waddington's *Handling Synne* discusses among other things, the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, and sacrilege with well-laid examples. The anonymous poem "Cursor Mundi" provides a spiritual history of the world from the Creation to Doomsday. Middle English Romances were written in French and catered to the upper class. The use of English in this literary form commences only from the mid-thirteenth century. The romances are distinguished by the tales of knights, the supernatural, where love spurs on or acts as an excuse for the adventures of the hero.

The earliest romances were always in verse, ranging from one thousand to six thousand lines, sometimes even longer, characterised by eight syllable couplets and the use of tail rhyme – these share some similarities with the epic, but do not follow much unity of action, with the characters reduced to types. Classical history and legends provided sources for these romances. *The Matter of Britain, The Matter of Rome,* and *The Matter of France* are significant texts of this category.

Arthur and Merlin and *Le Morte Arthur* were other significant texts, the latter almost ballad-like in its narrative.

From about 1360 to 1400, England experienced one of its most turbulent phases in its entire history. The Black Death which began in 1348 resulting in tremendous suffering while Kentish peasants under Wat Tyler rose up in protest resulting in the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381. However, it is during these years that a truly English literary tradition began to develop, poetry with vitality and energy emerged in stark contrast to the bleak socio-political realities at its backdrop. It was also the time when the East-Midland dialect was accepted as 'standard' English and its status was firmly established by poets such as Langland, Gower and most importantly, Chaucer. You will read about them in detail in the following unit.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q4. Which is one of the most well-known Anglo-Saxon epic poems?

Q5. What marks the end of the Anglo-Saxon period?

Q6. Name the language that emerged after the Anglo-Norman conquest.



1.5 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you will be able to trace the development of English literature starting from the Anglo-Saxon period and gain a broad view of the major literary forms and some of the major literary works of the Anglo-Saxon period. The introductory unit will enable you to grasp the social background of the Anglo-Saxon period in which English Literature is considered to first find its developing roots.



1.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: Anglo-Saxon literature is a synthesis of many different linguistic groups that successively occupied or conquered the British Isles.

Ans to Q 2: The influence of the Britons to Anglo Saxon literature can be said to consist of two main characteristics: the first is a vigorous