

# Classics of English Literature

## Unit 1 – Old English & Medieval (450–1485)

### Week 1: Old English and Middle English

The country of England and the English language did not always exist the way that it does today. One must look back in time to the historical context in order to understand the literature.

Many countries have invaded the British Isles over the years, beginning with the Romans in 55 B.C. Their influence still survives in roadways, the public baths, and the famous Hadrian's Wall. After the Romans abandoned the British Isles, Germanic peoples crossed the English Channel and conquered the Bretons. This began the Middle Ages in England. First, the Jutes came, followed by the Angles then the Saxons. By A.D. 450, the Anglo-Saxons were in firm control of England and introduced the language of Old English.

Old English is so far different from Modern English that it looks like a foreign language. Some of the letters are the same Roman letters that are currently used, and other letters have long since disappeared and are not used anymore. The sentence structure follows similar rules to ancient Latin by using inflections and special endings on words. Even the vocabulary is different from Modern English.

Because of its roots from Germanic peoples, many words in Modern English are similar to German words. Once the Celts had been conquered, every language afterwards had similar characteristics because they all had an Indo-European language background. Each people group brought different vocabulary words to the language. The Celts contributed place names while religious terms came from Latin. The Scandinavians brought words about everyday items. Then the French added in words about politics, aristocratic living, and professions.

Like any language, Old English changed over time. As other people groups invaded England, including the Vikings, they brought new spellings and new vocabulary to the language. Over time, English changed from a language ruled by inflections to a language controlled by words and vocabulary. By 1100, Old English had changed enough that linguists now consider it to be Middle English.

As far as languages go, Middle English was very turbulent. The language was consistently changing for the next 350 years. Early settlers used Celtic words, the Saxons had brought German words, the Vikings contributed Scandinavian words, and later the Normans introduced French words. Spellings were changing and becoming standardized. Even the vowels changed sounds and purpose during this time.

With the variety of changes in the language came a new form of English as a language.

### Old English Poetry

Encouraged by King Alfred, works in Latin and various English dialects were preserved by monks as part of life in the monasteries. Since the Vikings were wreaking havoc and destroying much property and written work, King Alfred believed that translating as much as possible into the West Saxon dialect would preserve the written works. He was right! Due to

King Alfred's diligence, today the world of literature has portions of writing in Old English for today's scholars to study.

Poetry during the Anglo-Saxon period was mostly passed down orally instead of written. To help people remember the poetry, it often included extensive repetition. The main themes found in the poetry are wisdom, courage, and loyalty. Most of the poetry was rather somber. This makes sense because people write about what they know. The Middle Ages were a turbulent time filled with war, famine, and disease. As a consequence, the poetry reflects the somber nature of life. Scholars have found some poetry filled with humor; however, those poems are rare.

### Introduction to *Beowulf*

Although no one is certain about an absolute date, *Beowulf* was written sometime between the seventh and tenth centuries. It details the story of a young warrior who has come to free the Danes from a monster and the consequent catastrophes which come with that. As a piece of literature, *Beowulf* is a poem of epic length similar to the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Because of the amount of literature which was destroyed during this time, only one copy of *Beowulf* still remains. It currently rests in the British Library. The copy is badly burned but still legible for those who have studied it, copied it, and translated it over the years.

Scholars have debated the meanings within the book. Should it be studied or not? Was there any literary value within its pages? Because of one scholar from Oxford, *Beowulf* was given a place in the canon and is now studied by English students in both America and England. This scholar was J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*.

*Beowulf* has different aspects to study in contrast to more recent short stories and poetry. Old English poetry discusses warriors and kings, nations and monsters. It is full of Biblical allusions and superstitions. The themes tend towards descriptions of character traits, like courage and loyalty. Also, Old English poetry uses alliteration and caesuras in abundance, more so than even modern poetry. One device commonly used is kenning, which is not used anymore. Study the definitions of these literary terms so they can be identified throughout the poem.

### Literary Terms

The following definitions and examples come from *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* by J.A. Cuddon, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Penguin, 1991).

**Alliteration:** A figure of speech in which consonants, especially at the beginning of words or stressed syllables, are repeated. In Old English poetry, alliteration was a continual and essential part of the metrical scheme and until the late Middle Ages was often used thus.

**Caesura:** (Latin: "a cutting") A break or pause in a line of poetry dictated, usually, by the natural rhythm of the language. In Old English verse, the caesura was used . . . to indicate the half line.

**Kenning:** The term derives from the use of the Old Norse verb *kenna* "to know, recognize." It is a device for introducing descriptive color or for suggesting associations without distracting attention from the essential statement.

Cuddon offers the following instances of Old English kennings:

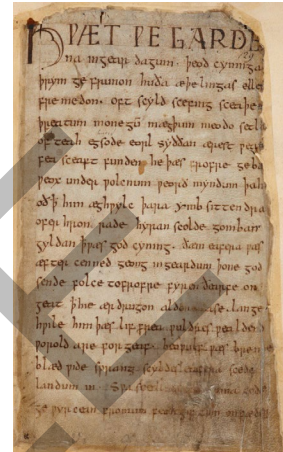
- a) *helmberend*—“helmet bearer” = “warrior”
- b) *beadoleoma*—“battle light” = “flashing sword”
- c) *swansrad*—“swan road” = “sea”

Essentially, then, a kenning is a compact metaphor that functions as a name or epithet; it is also, in its more complex forms, a riddle in miniature.

## Reading

Our first reading is the epic poem *Beowulf*. Here is a picture of an original copy of *Beowulf* in Old English.

Please note that the acclaimed Seamus Heaney translation of *Beowulf* has been used for all the vocabulary and discussion questions. Since it was published in 1999, it is not in the public domain. However, the poetry and imagery of his translation are beautiful and respect the alliteration and kenning literary devices of the Old English. Used copies of his translation are available online at a reasonable cost. There is a twenty-three page introduction that gives a plethora of information about *Beowulf* and his translation. By taking the time to read the introduction, you will have a better understanding of the poem and appreciation of the translation process and the literary devices used.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf#/media/File:Beowulf\\_Cotton\\_MS\\_Vitellius\\_A\\_XV\\_f.132r.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beowulf#/media/File:Beowulf_Cotton_MS_Vitellius_A_XV_f.132r.jpg)

Be aware that the Kindle version on Amazon is not the translation by Seamus Heaney but by J. Lesslie Hall which is also available for free on [Project Gutenberg](#). Hall’s translation includes a preface, background to the story, list of abbreviations, glossary of proper names, and a list of words and phrases not in general use.

World Book also has a translation available by Francis Barton Gummere. To access this eBook, log in to World Book Online using the instructions from the course lessons page. Click "eBooks." Search for *Beowulf*. Gummere does not have an introduction, but there are several pages of footnoted explanations at the end of the text.