

# THE ORIGINS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE: ANGLO-SAXON POETRY AND PROSE

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**ABSTRACT:** The origins of English literature go back to the Anglo-Saxon period, which lasted from the 5th to the 11th century. During this time, Old English became the language of both poetry and prose. These early writings reflect the life, beliefs, and culture of the Anglo-Saxon people. The combination of pagan traditions and Christian influence created a unique literary style that became the foundation of later English literature.

**Keywords:**, Anglo-Saxon poetry, Anglo-Saxon Prose, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

**Anglo-Saxon Poetry :** Anglo-Saxon poetry was mainly oral. Poets, known as scops, recited verses at gatherings to entertain and teach listeners. The poems often focused on heroic deeds, fate, loyalty, and faith. The most famous poem of this era is Beowulf, which tells the story of a brave hero who fights monsters and dragons to protect his people. Other important poems include The Seafarer, The Wanderer, and The Dream of the Rood. These poems used alliteration instead of rhyme, strong rhythm, and kennings — special metaphors like “whale-road” meaning the sea. Through such poems, the Anglo-Saxons expressed their view of life as full of struggle, courage, and faith in destiny (wyrd). Anglo-Saxon poetry refers to the verse written in Old English between the 7th and 11th centuries in what is now England. It was the earliest form of English literature and was originally passed down orally before being written down by monks.

Main Features: Language: Written in Old English (the earliest form of English). Alliteration: Instead of rhyme, Anglo-Saxon poetry used alliteration (repetition of the same sound at the beginning of words). Example: “Bright blades, battle’s beginning.” Caesura: A pause in the middle of each line, dividing it into two halves. Kennings: Figurative expressions or compound words, like: “whale-road” (for the sea) “battle-sweat” (for blood) Themes: Heroism, fate (wyrd), loyalty, warfare, and religion. Tone: Often serious, reflecting a world of struggle and courage. Famous Examples: “Beowulf” – the greatest epic poem of the Anglo-Saxon period, telling the story of the hero Beowulf and his battles with monsters like Grendel. “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer” – lyrical poems expressing loneliness, exile, and faith

Anglo-Saxon poetry is heroic and reflective, mixing pagan values like bravery with Christian morals. It forms the foundation of all later English literature.

Anglo-Saxon Prose : Prose writing developed later, especially during the reign of King Alfred the Great in the 9th century. He encouraged learning and translated many Latin books into Old English so that ordinary people could understand them. The most famous prose work is The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which records important events in England’s early history. Religious writers such as Ælfric and Wulfstan also produced sermons and moral writings that helped spread Christian values. Anglo-Saxon prose is an important part of early English literature that developed between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Unlike poetry, which was written in verse, prose was written in ordinary language and used mainly for religious, historical, and educational purposes. It was a way to spread knowledge and preserve the English language at a time when Latin was the main language of learning in Europe.

The most famous promoter of Anglo-Saxon prose was King Alfred the Great, who encouraged the translation of important Latin books into Old English so that ordinary people could understand them. Another great prose writer was Ælfric, a monk who wrote Homilies and Lives of Saints to teach Christian values. One of the greatest prose works of the time was The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a historical record of the events in early England. Anglo-Saxon prose is known for its clarity, simplicity, and moral purpose. It

helped to build a national identity and became the foundation of English historical and religious writing. Without these early works, much of England's history and culture would have been lost.

Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose mark the true beginning of English literature. They reveal the spirit, beliefs, and struggles of early English people and show how heroism, religion, and history shaped their world. These early works became the roots from which later English literature grew, connecting the past to the rich literary traditions that followed. Anglo-Saxon poetry was mainly oral. Poets, known as scops, recited verses at gatherings to entertain and teach listeners. The poems often focused on heroic deeds, fate, loyalty, and faith. The most famous poem of this era is Beowulf, which tells the story of a brave hero who fights monsters and dragons to protect his people. Other important poems include The Seafarer, The Wanderer, and The Dream of the Rood. These poems used alliteration instead of rhyme, strong rhythm, and kennings — special metaphors like “whale-road” meaning the sea. Through such poems, the Anglo-Saxons expressed their view of life as full of struggle, courage, and faith in destiny (wyrd).

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**The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle :** The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is one of the most significant works of Old English prose. It is a collection of historical writings that record important events in England from the Roman period until the Norman Conquest in 1066. The work was begun during the reign of King Alfred the Great, who wanted to promote education and preserve English history in the native language rather than in Latin. The Chronicle was written by different monks in various monasteries, and each monastery kept its own version, updating it year by year. These entries, called annals, include information about wars, royal successions, deaths of important people, and natural events. Because of

this, the Chronicle is both a historical record and a reflection of everyday life in Anglo-Saxon England. The language of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is simple and direct, showing the early development of English prose. It is not only a source of history but also a treasure of English culture and identity. Without it, much of early English history would have been forgotten.

In conclusion ,The study of Anglo-Saxon poetry, prose, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reveals the strong foundation of English literature and culture. These early works show how the English language developed from its earliest form and how the people of that time expressed their thoughts, beliefs, and history. Anglo-Saxon poetry reflected heroism, fate, and faith through rhythm and alliteration; prose focused on learning, religion, and national identity; while the Chronicle recorded the events that shaped the English nation. Together, they illustrate the creativity and intelligence of early English society. Without these works, modern readers would not fully understand the origins of English language and literature. The Anglo-Saxon period, therefore, remains one of the most important and influential eras in the history of English writing.

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