History of british literature

Late Medieval Period 14th Century British Literature 14th and 15th were period of transition from feudalism to pre-industrial era. A time of political, social and ideological conflicts; England was in war with France (the hundred year war 1337-1453 Edward's claim to the French throne and attempt to bring England, Gascony and Flanders under unified political control). The defeats in France lead to deepening the internal crisis. The decline in agriculture together with the rise in the population resulted in frequent famines and helped the spread during the 14th c. of the " Black Death". 381 – The Peasants' Revolt. Culture: by 15th century England had become a nation with the sense of separate identity and indigenous culture 1362-English became the official language in court and was also used in schools. 14thc. witnessed the first original literary works written in English. Middle English literature English literature of the medieval period, c. 1100 to c. 1500. Background The Norman conquest of England in 1066 traditionally signifies the beginning of 200 years of the domination of French in English letters. French cultural dominance, moreover, was general in Europe at this time.

French language and culture replaced English in polite court society and had lasting effects on English culture. But the native tradition survived, although little 13th-century, and even less 12th-century, vernacular literature is extant, since most of it was transmitted orally. Anglo-Saxon fragmented into several dialects and gradually evolved into Middle English, which, despite an admixture of French, is unquestionably English. By the mid-14th cent. , Middle English had become the literary as well as the spoken language of England. The Early Period

Several poems in early Middle English are extant. The Orrmulum (c. 1200), a verse translation of parts of the Gospels, is of linguistic and prosodic rather than literary interest. Of approximately the same date, The Owl and the Nightingale (see separate article) is the first example in English of the debat, a popular continental form; in the poem, the owl, strictly monastic and didactic, and the nightingale, a free and amorous secular spirit, charmingly debate the virtues of their respective ways of life. The Thirteenth Century Middle English prose of the 13th cent. ontinued in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon prose? homiletic, didactic, and directed toward ordinary people rather than polite society. The " Katherine Group" (c. 1200), comprising three saints' lives, is typical. The Ancren Riwle(c. 1200) is a manual for prospective anchoresses; it was very popular, and it greatly influenced the prose of the 13th and 14th cent. The fact that there was no French prose tradition was very important to the preservation of the English prose tradition. In the 13th cent. the romance, an important continental narrative verse form, was introduced in England.

It drew from three rich sources of character and adventure: the legends of Charlemagne, the legends of ancient Greece and Rome, and the British legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Layamon's Brut, a late 13th-century metrical romance (a translation from the French), marks the first appearance of Arthurian matter in English (see Arthurian legend). Original English romances based upon indigenous material include King Horn and Havelok the Dane, both 13th-century works that retain elements of the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition.

However, French romances, notably the Arthurian romances of Chretien de Troyes, were far more influential than their English counterparts. In England French romances popularized ideas of adventure and heroism quite contrary to those of Anglo-Saxon heroic literature and were representative of wholly different values and tastes. Ideals of courtly love, together with its elaborate manners and rituals, replaced those of the heroic code; adventure and feats of courage were pursued for the sake of the knight's lady rather than for the sake of the hero's honor or the glory of his tribal king.

Continental verse forms based on metrics and rhyme replaced the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line in Middle Englishpoetry(with the important exception of the 14th-century alliterative revival). Many French literary forms also became popular, among them the fabliau; the exemplum, or moral tale; the animal fable; and the dream vision. The continental allegorical tradition, which derived from classical literature, is exemplified by the Roman de la Rose, which had a strong impact on English literature. Medieval works of literature often center on a popular rhetorical figure, such as the ubi sunt, which remarks on the inevitability? nd sadness? of change, loss, and death; and the cursor mundi, which harps on the vanity of human grandeur. A 15, 000-line 13th-century English poem, the Cursor Mundi, retells human history (i. e. , the medieval version? biblical plus classical story) from the point of view its title implies. A number of 13th-century secular and religious Middle English lyrics are extant, including the exuberant Sumer Is Icumen In, but like Middle English literature in general, the lyric reached its fullest flower during the second half of the 14th cent. Lyrics continued popular in the 15th cent. from which time the ballad also dates. The Fourteenth Century The

poetry of the alliterative revival (see alliteration), the unexplained reemergence of the Anglo-Saxon verse form in the 14th cent. , includes some of the best poetry in Middle English. The Christian allegory The Pearl (see separate article) is a poem of great intricacy and sensibility that is meaningful on several symbolic levels. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, by the same anonymous author, is also of high literary sophistication, and its intelligence, vividness, and symbolic interest render it possibly the finest Arthurian poem in English.

Other important alliterative poems are the moral allegory Piers Plowman, attributed to William Langland, and the alliterative Morte Arthur, which, like nearly all English poetry until the mid-14th cent. , was anonymous. The works of Geoffrey Chaucer mark the brilliant culmination of Middle English literature. Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales are stories told each other by pilgrims? who comprise a very colorful cross section of 14th-century English society? on their way to the shrine at Canterbury. The tales are cast into many different verse forms and genres and collectively explore virtually every significant medieval theme.

Chaucer's wise and humane work also illuminates the full scope of medieval thought. Overshadowed by Chaucer but of some note are the works of John Gower. The Fifteenth Century: The 15th cent. is not distinguished in English letters, due in part to the social dislocation caused by the prolonged Wars of the Roses. Of the many 15th-century imitators of Chaucer the best-known are John Lydgate and Thomas Hoccleve. Other poets of the time include Stephen Hawes and Alexander Barclay and the Scots poets William Dunbar, Robert Henryson, and Gawin Douglas.

The poetry of John Skelton, which is mostly satiric, combines medieval and Renaissance elements. William Caxton introduced printing to England in 1475 and in 1485 printed Sir Thomas Malory's Morte d'Arthur. This prose work, written in the twilight of chivalry, casts the Arthurian tales into coherent form and views them with an awareness that they represent a vanishing way of life. The miracle play, a long cycle of short plays based upon biblical episodes, was popular throughout the Middle Ages in England. The morality play, an allegorical drama centering on the struggle for man's soul, originated in the 15th cent.

The finest of the genre is Everyman. English Society in the 14th Century Summary: The Canterbury Tales is set in fourteenth-century London, one of the medieval period's great centers of commerce and culture. In England at this time, society was still very strictly ordered, with the King and nobles having all power in things political and the Catholic Church having all authority in spiritual matters. English Society in the 14th Century The Canterbury Tales, written by Geoffrey Chaucer, is recognized as the first book of poetry written in the English language.

This is because poetry was often written in Italian or Latin not English, even writers from England wrote in the other languages because English was considered low class and vulgar, but after Chaucer's writings were published they became a recognized and legitimate work. The Canterbury Tales gives modern readers a good judgment of language in the 14th century as it also gives a rich, elaborated tapestry of medieval social life, combining elements of all classes, from nobles to workers, from priests and nuns to drunkards and thieves.

The view of the Canterbury Tales being held up as a precise reflection of English society in the 14th century is significantly correct, because they were very attached to the church and beliefs and the way they all act in the Tales shows how they really were a society of the Church. " The Canterbury Tales is set in fourteenth-century London, one of the medieval period's great centers of commerce and culture. In England at this time, society was still very strictly ordered, with the King and nobles having all power in things political and the Catholic Church having all authority in spiritual matters.

However, trade and commerce with other nations had expanded dramatically in this century, giving rise to a new and highly vocal middle class comprised of merchants, traders, shopkeepers, and skilled craftsmen. " The story starts with a general prologue that provides a panoramic view of society England begins the period with wars, unrest, and almost chaos; it concludes with a settled dynasty, a reformed religion, and a people united and progressive. England in 1300 was well on the way to rapid expansion. It was rapidly increasing in intellectual and mathematical sophistication.

Technically, thanks to water power and the mechanical discoveries that flowed from it, England was in the midst of what many historians call the Medieval Industrial Revolution. One reason there seems to be such a break between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was that there was in fact a break. The 14th Century was a time of turmoil, diminished expectations, loss of confidence in institutions, and feelings of helplessness at forces beyond human contro. lThe 14th century in Europe was a time of great unrest. This as primarily caused by the outbreak of bubonic plague better known as the Black Death. Another cause were the peasant revolts, and the schism within

the Catholic Church. The Canterbury Tales, written by Geoffrey Chaucer, is recognized as the first book of poetry written in the English language. This is because poetry was often written in Italian or Latin not English, even writers from England wrote in the other languages because English was considered low class and vulgar, but after Chaucer's writings were published they became a recognized and legitimate work.

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Alliterative verse: 8th - 14th century AD The story of English literature begins with the Germanic tradition of the Anglo-Saxon settlers. Beowulfstands at its head. This epic poem of the 8th century is in Anglo-Saxon, now more usually described as Old English. It is incomprehensible to a reader familiar only with modern English. Even so, there is a continuous linguistic development between the two. The most significant turning point, from about 1100, is the development of Middle English - differing from Old English in the addition of a French vocabulary after the Norman conquest.

French and Germanic influences subsequently compete for the mainstream role in English literature. The French poetic tradition inclines to lines of a regular metrical length, usually linked by rhyme into couplets or stanzas.

German poetry depends more on rhythm andstress, with repeated consonants (alliteration) to bind the phrases. Elegant or subtle rhymes have a courtly flavour. The hammer blows of alliteration are a type of verbal athleticism more likely to draw applause in a hall full of warriors.

Both traditions achieve a magnificent flowering in England in the late 14th century, towards the end of the Middle English period. Piers Plowmanand Sir Gawainare masterpieces which look back to Old English. By contrastChaucer, a poet of the court, ushers in a new era of English literature. Piers Plowman and Sir Gawain: 14th century AD Of these two great English alliterative poems, the second is entirely anonymous and the first virtually so. The narrator of Piers Plowmancalls himself Will; occasional references in the text suggest that his name may be Langland.

Nothing else, apart from this poem, is known of him. Piers Plowman exists in three versions, the longest amounting to more than 7000 lines. It is considered probable that all three are by the same author. If so he spends some twenty years, from about 1367, adjusting and refining his epic creation. Piers the ploughman is one of a group of characters searching for Christian truth in the complex setting of a dream. Though mainly a spiritual quest, the work also has a political element. It contains sharply observed details of a corrupt and materialistic age (Wycliffe is among Langland's English contemporaries).

Where Piers Plowman is tough and gritty, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight(dating from the same period) is more polished in its manner and more courtly in its content. The characters derive partly fromArthurian legend. A mysterious green knight arrives one Christmas at the court of King

Arthur. He invites any knight to strike him with an axe and to receive the blow back a year later. Gawain accepts the challenge. He cuts off the head of the green knight, who rides away with it. The rest of the poem concerns Gawain, a year later, at the green knight's castle. In a tale of love (for the green knight's wife) and subsequent eceit, Gawain emerges with little honour. The green knight spares his life but sends him home to Arthur's court wearing the wife's girdle as a badge of shame. Geoffrey Chaucer at court: AD 1367-1400 In 1367 one of four new 'yeomen of the chamber' in the household of Edward III is Geoffrey Chaucer, then aged about twenty-seven. The young man's wife, Philippa, is already a lady-in-waiting to the queen. A few years later Chaucer becomes one of the king's esquires, with duties which include entertaining the court with stories andmusic. There can rarely have been a more inspired appointment.

Chaucer's poems are designed to be read aloud, in the first instance by himself. Their range, from high romance to bawdy comedy, is well calculated to hold the listeners spellbound. Courtly circles in England are his first audience. Chaucer's publiccareeris one of almost unbroken success in two consecutive reigns. He undertakes diplomatic missions abroad on behalf of the king; he is given administrative posts, such as controlling the customs, which bring lodgings and handsome stipends. Even occasional disasters (such as being robbed twice in four days in 1390 and losing ? 0 of Richard II'smoney) do him no lasting harm. A measure of Chaucer's skill as a courtier is that during the 1390s, when he is in the employment ofRichard II, he also receives gifts at Christmas from Richard's rival, Bolingbroke. When Bolingbroke unseats Richard II in 1399, taking his place on the throne

as Henry IV, Chaucer combines diplomacy and wit to secure his position. Having lost his royal appointments, he reminds the new king of his predicament in a poem entitled 'The Complaint of Chaucer to his Empty Purse'. The last line of each verse begs the purse to 'be heavy again, or else must I die'.

Henry IV hears the message. The court poet is given a new annuity. Henry is certainly aware that he is keeping in his royal circle a poet of great distinction. Chaucer's reputation is such that, when he dies in the following year, he is granted the very unusual honour - for a commoner - of being buried in Westminster abbey. Troilus and Criseyde: AD 1385 Chaucer's first masterpiece is his subtle account of the wooing of Criseyde by Troilus, with the active encouragement of Criseyde's uncle Pandarus. The tender joys of their love affair are followed by Criseyde's betrayal and Troilus's death in battle.

Chaucer adapts to his own purposes the more conventionally dramatic account of this legendary affair written some fifty years earlier byBoccaccio(probably read by Chaucer when on a mission to Florence in 1373). His own very long poem (8239 lines) is written in the early 1380s and is complete by 1385. Chaucer's tone is delicate, subtle, oblique - though this does not prevent him from introducing and gently satirising many vivid details of life at court, as he guides the reader through the long psychological intrigue by which Pandarus eventually delivers Troilus into Criseyde's bed.

The charm and detail of the poem, giving an intimate glimpse of a courtly world, is akin to the delightful miniatures which illustrate books of hours of

this period in the style known asInternational Gothic. Yet this delicacy is only one side of Chaucer's abundant talent - as he soon proves in The Canterbury Tales. The Canterbury Tales: AD 1387-1400 Collections of tales are a favourite literary convention of the 14th century. Boccaccio'sDecameron is the best-known example before Chaucer's time, but Chaucer inThe Canterbury Tales outshines his predecessors.

He does so in the range and vitality of the stories in his collection, from the courtly tone of 'The Knight's Tale' to the rough and often obscene humour of those known technically as fabliaux. He does so also in the detail and humour of the framework holding the stories together. His account of the pilgrims as they ride from London to Canterbury, with their constant bickering and rivalry, amounts to a comic masterpiece in its own right. The pilgrims, thirty of them including Chaucer himself, gather one spring day at the Tabard in Southwark.

The host of the inn, Harry Bailly, is a real contemporary of Chaucer's (his name features in historical records). He will act as their guide on the route to Canterbury and he proposes that they pass the time on their journey by telling stories. Each pilgrim is to tell two on the way out and two on the way back. Whoever is judged to have told the best tale will have a free supper at the Tabard on their return. Of this ambitious total of 120 stories, Chaucer completes only 24 by the time of his death. Even so the collection amounts to some 17, 000 lines - mainly of rhyming verse, but with some passages of prose.

The pilgrims represent all sections of society from gentry to humble craftsmen (the only absentees are the labouring poor, unable to afford a

pilgrimage of this kind). There are respectable people from the various classes - such as the knight, the parson and the yeoman - but the emphasis falls mainly on characters who are pretentious, scurrilous, mendacious, avaricious or lecherous. The pilgrims are vividly described, one by one, in Chaucer'sPrologue. The relationships between them evolve in the linking passages between the tales, as Harry Bailly arranges who shall speak next.

The pilgrims for the most part tell tales closely related to their station in life or to their personal character. Sometimes the anecdotes even reflect mutual animosities. The miller gives a scurrilously comic account of a carpenter being cuckolded. Everyone laughs heartily except the reeve, who began his career as a carpenter. The reeve gets his own back with an equally outrageous tale of the seduction of a miller's wife and daughter. But the pilgrim who has most delighted six centuries of readers is the five-times-married Wife of Bath, taking a lusty pleasure in her own appetites and richly scorning the ideals of celibacy.