

2. The Anglo-Norman or Middle English Period (1066-1500 AD)

With the Norman conquest began a new era in the history of England literature. The Normans brought with them their rich French culture and language. The literature of this period comes under the category of Norman-French Literature or Anglo-French Literature. Since the Anglo-Norman period belonged to the Middle Ages or Medieval times in Britain History, we also call it the Middle English period in the history of English literature.

The Norman Conquest brought a radical change in English culture, law, language, and character. English became the language spoken only by the poor and powerless. While Norman-French became the language of the rich. It also became the symbol of social status and prestige. The Anglo-Normans wrote mainly to cater to the taste of Norman rulers. Moreover, only the monarchs and courtiers of that time had a right to encourage the literary writings.

We can't deny the fact that the Norman Contest stimulated the awakening of the people, who extremely needed an outside stimulus at that time. Soon the people got influenced by a new vision and ultimately united in a common hope. As a result, the Anglo-Saxons' hostility towards the Normans also turned into national unity.

The Normans brought with them their soldiers, artisans, traders, chroniclers, minstrels, and scholars. With their help, they wanted to revive knowledge, record memorable events, celebrate victories, and sing of love and adventure. In addition, the most popular forms of writing for the Anglo-Normans were chronicles, religious and didactic writing, poetry, romances and drama.

2.1. The Romances of Anglo-Norman Period

In contrast to the courage, seriousness, and savagery of the Anglo-Saxon literature, the Normans introduced romantic tales of love and adventure in literature. This made the Anglo-Norman period to be chivalric rather than a heroic one. Romance became the most popular form of literature during the Anglo-Norman or Middle English period. These romances were famous for their stories rather than poetry. Most of them, in fact, had their origin in Latin and French sources. They told the stories of King Arthur, The War of Troy, the mythical doings of Charlemagne, and Alexander the Great.

2.2. Chronicles in the Anglo-Norman Period

In the Anglo-Norman period of English literature, chronicles became a well-established form of writing. These chronicles basically recorded the history of kings. Though written in the Anglo-Norman language, these chronicles, however, became the major source of historical knowledge for medieval people. Additionally, they contained historical events, and legendary material without any interpretation or comment by the author.

2.3. The Mystery and Miracle Plays

Another remarkable achievement of the Middle English Period, however, was religious or didactic writings. Under this category came the Mystery and Miracle plays. The Mystery plays were based on subjects taken from the Bible while the Miracle plays depicted the lives

of saints. Since only the clergymen of the church had the authority to write and perform these plays, they chose Latin as the medium of writing and performing these plays.

2.4. *The Morality Plays*

In the Middle English period, Morality plays also became very popular. Allegory was, in fact, the main streak of these plays. In the Morality plays characters were personified abstractions presenting the conflict in the human soul. The sole purpose of these plays was to instruct the people through the Bible, lives of saints, and the conflict between good and evil. Hence, these plays also came under the category of religious and didactic writing of that period.

2.5. *The Anglo-Norman Poets*

Some of the famous poets of the Middle English period and their notable works are briefly discussed below:

(i) *William Langland*

One of the notable poets of the *Middle Ages*, William Langland emerged in the 14th century. He held a significant place in the history of English literature and wrote many important poems. His most famous poem is '*A Vision of Piers the Plowman*'. As a satire on the corrupt religious practices, Langland's poem clearly discusses the ethical problems of that time. Most of his poems are satirical in nature and bring about moral, political and social questions.

(ii) *John Gower*

John Gower also occupied a significant place in the development of English poetry of the Medieval period. He wrote around the 14th or 15th century bringing about the poems that represented the English culmination of courtly medieval poetry. His poems, indeed, proved that English can compete with the other languages that had distinguished themselves in poetry. Gower was mainly a narrative poet and a moralist. His most famous poem is *Confession Amantis*, written in the form of conversation between the divine interpreter and the poet. Like Chaucer, John Gower also played a significant role in developing English language as a thoroughly equipped medium of literature.

(iii) **Dante, *The Divine Comedy*.**

Composed in the early fourteenth century, Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a trilogy of poems charting the poet's journey from hell (*Inferno*) through Purgatory (*Purgatorio*) to heaven (*Paradiso*)

Who is the father of English literature? Geoffrey Chaucer is known as the 'Father of English literature'.

(iv) *The Age of Chaucer*

Towards the end of the Middle English period came '*The Age of Chaucer*', covering the period from 1343 to 1450. It is the most significant time period in the literary history of English literature. Chaucer made a fresh and distinct beginning in English literature and

became the 'Father of English literature' as well as the 'Father of English poetry'. Chaucer's poetry has been widely read from his own day to the present time. He was not merely a bookman or the visionary, rather, he was a man of the world and its affairs.

Chaucer's most significant work is *Canterbury Tales*. It is a collection of stories related by the pilgrims of different sections of society who are on their way to Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury. A landmark in the history of English poetry, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* enriched the English language and meter to an extent that could be conveniently used for any purpose. Furthermore, his introduction of a variety of characters into a single action and their engagement in animated dialogues fulfilled every requirement of the dramatists who were short of bringing their plays on the stage. Chaucer's works also showed to the novelists the way to portray their characters.

(v) **Marco Polo, *Travels*.**

Marco Polo, was an Italian traveller who was born in 1254. He dictated stories of his travels throughout Europe and Asia to a cellmate after he was imprisoned during a war between Venice and Genoa, and the *Travels* was born. It became, by medieval standards, a bestseller, 150 years before the invention of the first modern printing press. His account of adventures is sometimes a little dull and slow-moving, but is a valuable insight into the medieval world

2.6.1. *Decline in English Poetry*

Chaucer's significance in the development of English literature is remarkable as he shifted poetry from the region of Theology and Metaphysics to the old classical principle of the direct imitation of nature. After Chaucer there came a decline in English poetry for about 100 years. The period from 1400 to the Renaissance was bereft of quality literature. The poets of that time period produced little work and merely imitated Chaucer and his contemporaries.

Although the beginning of the Anglo-Norman Period is obvious, historians differ on when this period ended. Some historians say that it ended in 1144 or 1066, while for others it lasted up to 1450 or 1500. The Norman Conquest of England had, in fact, a profound effect in introducing various changes in the history of English literature. 'The Age of Chaucer was followed by The Renaissance Period also known as the Elizabethan Period or the Age of Shakespeare in the history of English literature.