

Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 18
English Poetry: An Overview. Old English to Elizabethan

Hello, welcome again. I am sure you must have found the poem that I gave in the last class remarkable. It must have given you an extraordinary experience; because the poem has the capacity to align us on to some extraordinary things some eco friendly things that is the reason why I gave you that poem.

Of course, when we give you this kind of poems as assignment they serve not just one but multiple purposes. Of course, the apparent reason was to make you identify the different figures of speech that you learnt in the class. But more than that if you read that if you read that particular poem “The Heart of the Tree” you would be coming face to face with a remarkable poem that has every ability to spark and igniting us with an immense love for nature.

So, that is the benefit of reading poetry because we are in the presence of fire; a fire that is alive and kicking. So, when you touch it, it has the capacity to burn us; I say burn not in a negative sense, it can destroy the impurities and it can create afresh.

So, in that sense by reading poetry we become twice born because the first time we read, it kills all the impurities in us and therefore, we are born again a fresh probably in the ideals that humanity needs to practice, you can call it- by reading literature I become twice born. In this class we are going to discuss this because it is a class or a week on poetry.

We will have to cover different aspects of poetry, different movements of poetry, different sensibilities of poetry, that is the reason why we began this week with an active discussion of various elements of poetry, different figures of speech that propel poetry, that act as a kind of a driving force behind poetry.

In other words, like if you look at it as a kind of a metaphor, if you look at poetry, if you can compare poetry to an electronic gadget, these things act as a kind of a CPU, if you compare poetry to a system, a computer, probably various figures of speech can be act as CPU, it is the system that powers up the whole thing. So, you can call it a CPU or something like that.

So, having understood various elements of poetry. Now, we move on to discussing poetry. As part of that we begin with an understanding of English poetry or British poetry (written in Britain in English). We have already discussed origins of poetry across the globe in one of the earlier classes.

So, in today's class we are going to discuss origins of poetry English Poetry-- the origins of English poetry as such and in the process we wish to take you through Elizabethan poetry and even a little later than that until metaphysical poetry, if time permits.

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Let's begin with

Old English Poetry

- Old English poetry or Anglo-Saxon poetry -- narrated and performed
- Only a few poems have survived in the written form
- Besides that, the authorship of many works are doubtful and anonymous
- Pagan, religious, and love songs dominated the genre of poetry
- Poetry was mostly heroic epics and elegies
- Beowulf -- the most influential and popular Old English epic

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Like poetry elsewhere, English poetry too has its origins in folk literature. It has a folk element to it. Therefore, it was used for narration, it was used for performance and therefore, it has a narrative and performative dimension to it of course. We discussed that poetry across the globe, during its initial phase, was not meant to be written. It was meant to be narrated, it was meant to be performed, sung and all that.

So, English poetry is no exception to that. English poetry, Old English poetry of course, it is also called Anglo-Saxon poetry. Unfortunately, we do not have many of those poems though we find references to some of these poems being written, we do not have access to them unfortunately, we have lost them to history, only a few of them have survived. So, we will discuss those surviving pieces here.

One of the problems we encounter when we discuss Old English poetry, of course is something similar to old ancient Indian poetry, ancient Greek poetry as well. It is that we do not know the exact author, date, and the background when these things were composed. It is a common problem in textual editing, that is a common problem that we face.

And if we can list out some general characteristic features of various pieces, well they have paganistic origin, a free worship of nature. And highly religious as well because the tone is religious we have always said that poetry when it began it began as a part of religious ceremonies that is why most of our Indian Vedic hymns is a part of various religious rituals.

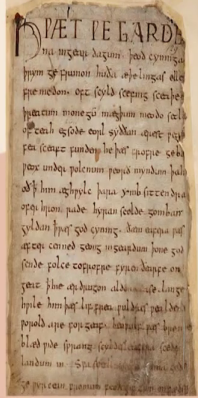
And even in Egypt, we discussed the pyramid text, how it is a part of various rituals especially, rituals related to death. So, even here they are part of various religious rituals and all that love songs all these things are a part of Old English poetry.

If you look at the form; well, generally speaking they have the heroic epics and elegies. We discussed them as sub types of poetry. Please recall what elegy stands for -- sad songs, songs that are meant to mourn somebody close to you and all that so, these are something.


The moment we say Old English poetry what comes to our mind is the first epic that we see in British poetry. It is called Beowulf. Beowulf is the most influential and popular English epic though there are a couple of poems that predate this, they do not match Beowulf in terms of its grandeur, beauty, style, language and diction. Therefore, you have every right to call Beowulf the first major literary work in English, especially Old English poetry.

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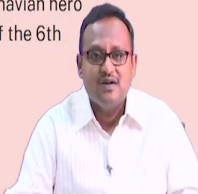
Beowulf



Beowulf is the most well known literary work written in the Old English
It is a heroic poem and the earliest known epic written in the vernacular English;
in 2007 Beowulf (Dir: Robert Zemeckis)



- ✓ Based on the continental Germanic theme, Beowulf is a 3,183 line alliterative poem
- ✓ The date of composition, authorship, and the original title are unknown
- ✓ The poem is named after the Scandinavian hero Beowulf and deals with the events of the 6th century.



If you recall in 2007 you also must have you know seen a movie based on the epic that we are about to discuss. Robert Zemeckis has brought this poetry on to a celluloid medium in an extraordinary way, in a very epic way. So, this rendition is also equally beautiful, that movie is based on this particular epic, the first English epic.

It is a heroic poem and like all other epics it makes use of heroic poetry genre. So, it is based on a continental Germanic theme. So, roughly speaking it has about 3200 lines. So, you can call Beowulf approximately is about 3200 alliterative lines; we do not know the exact date of its composition, author and all that. So, we can call it a folk epic. The epic is named after Beowulf, an eponymous Scandinavian hero known for his heroic deeds.

Remember, some of our ancient poetry they also serve as historical pieces. Through poetry our history was transmitted, before you know history as a particular subject or discipline of knowledge began we had poetry serving the purpose of that. Poetry almost doubled up as a historical work as well to a certain extent.

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Beowulf

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Divided into two parts, the plot revolves around the story of Beowulf

The poem begins in Denmark, where Beowulf visits to aid the King of Danes by killing the monster Grendel and his mother

Later, Beowulf becomes the King and similar events of battle follow until he dies fighting a dragon



Generally speaking, the poem begins in Denmark where Beowulf visits to support a king, the king of Danes because his kingdom was troubled by a monster called Grendel and Grendel's mother, they are kind of dragons. So, Beowulf has been called in to help the king and Beowulf successfully kills Grendel and of course, later Grendel's mother vows to take revenge and he has to encounter Grendel's mother as well. That was a part of the epic.

So, this is in a nutshell the heroic adventure of Beowulf and his encounter with Grendel and Grendel's mother. And later of course, the epic goes on to recount how Beowulf himself becomes a king and the kind of problems he encounters and later you know while fighting with another dragon he does not you know he does not succeed in that he dies. It is a kind of a tragic epic. So, this is Beowulf in a nutshell for you.

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Cædmon and Cynewulf

Cædmon is the earliest known English poet
Cædmon's *Hymn* is his only surviving work
It is a nine-line alliterative old English poem written in praise and honor of God

Cynewulf is a poet from the 9th c known for his religious poems
The Fates of the Apostles (in pic.), Juliana, Elene, and Christ II (also referred to as The Ascension) are the four signed poems of Cynewulf

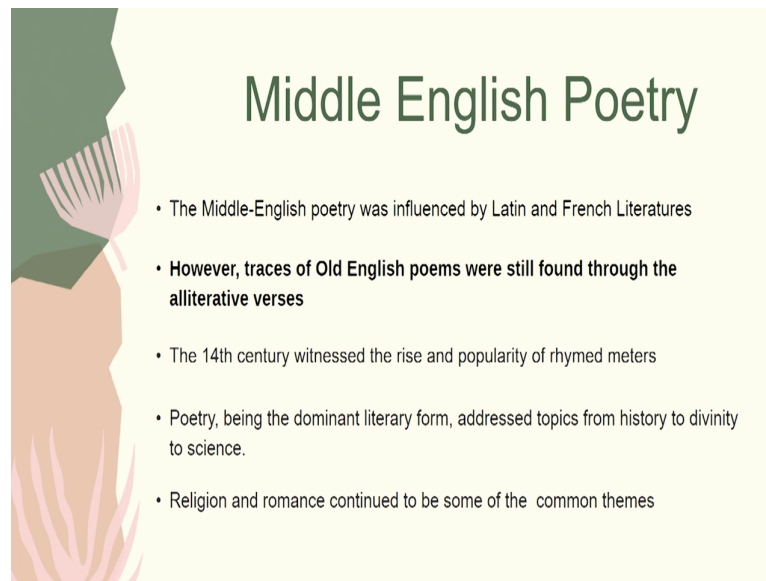
The slide includes two images: a circular inset showing a page from an Old English manuscript with text in a Gothic script, and a photograph of a stone edict or wall sculpture featuring a figure, likely related to the 'Fates of the Apostles' mentioned in the text.

From Beowulf, if we can come to the earliest known writers. These are some of the well known earliest writers we have in English poetry- Caedmon and Cynewulf. Especially, Caedmon's Hymn is his only surviving work, but we find references to his other works. In this work that is how we know he has written more than hymns and this poem is written in praise of or in the honor of God.

So, it is a kind of a religious song extolling the virtues of God and all that as the title itself suggests, it's composed in praise of God. Cynewulf is another poet approximately you know, he seemed to be 9th century you know 9th century religious poetry again he is the author of religious poetry we have you know four poems that are available to us The Fate of the Apostles, in fact, this the stone edict that you see is from the from there you know please see this stone edict.

Juliana, Elene and the Christ the II, it is also called the ascension these are his known works these are his known works. So, in other words these two names are significant because they are the earliest known English poets roughly speaking something somewhere about 8th and 9th century AD.

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From here, we move on to Middle English poetry, when we say Middle-English poetry something after 13th and 14th century. From generally speaking, a study of English literature is when classifying English literature we say from its origin until through 12th and 13th century it is called Old English. From 13th century onwards, especially early fourteenth century onwards it is Middle-English.

So, this is Middle-English generally speaking Middle-English poetry displays a heavy influence of Latin and French literature; however, it has not given up medieval the Middle English poetry has not altogether lost touch with the Old English poetry we still find remnants of Old English poetry.

Maybe in structural terms, if not in thematic way, at least structurally speaking because you find you come across the same alliterative versus religious verses composed in a particular style stylistically speaking you find traces of the Old English poetry as well. But by then Latin and French literatures have begun casting their influence.

So, you find a combination of all these influences when you come to the Middle-English poetry and well it is not until late or it is not until let us say late 15th century and early 16th century that you come across the advent of other forms of literature or other genres of literature. So, poetry is still the only preferred form of literature in the Middle-English; as I said same religious themes related to love heroic adventures they continue the scene.

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Chronicles from the Middle Age

Lazamon's *Brut*

Composed in and around 1205 by Lazamon, a monk of Arley Kings, the verse chronicles the history of Britain from the landing of Brutus to the death of Cadwallader in some 16,000 alliterative lines

Robert of Gloucester

Robert, a monk of Gloucester was not a poet but is known for his rhyming chronicles. There are doubts regarding the authorship of the concerned work, however Robert is believed to be one of the many chroniclers

Robert Manning of Brunne

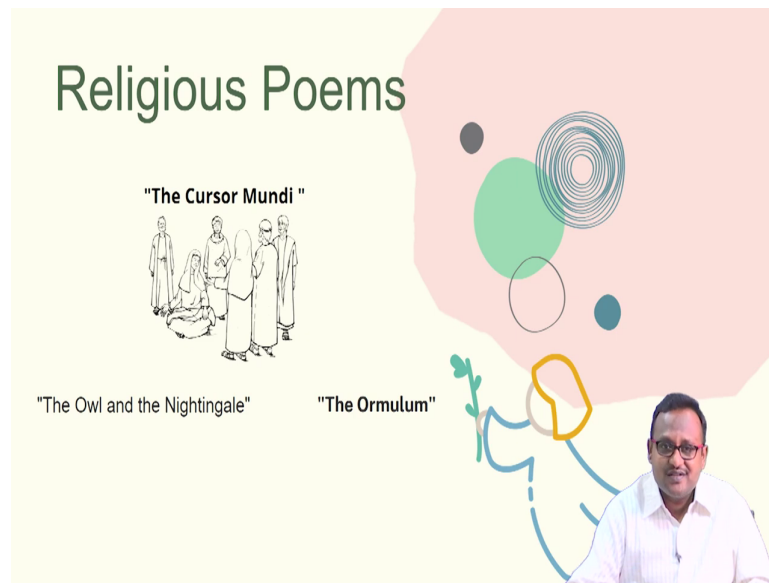
Here the history begins from the time of Noah and the Deluge and ends with the death of Edward I

So, these are some minor writers before we come to a major writer. 14th century produces the first major English poet; before we come to him we need to know you know some of his precursors these are some of his precursors; the major English poet that we referred to just a while ago was Chaucer.

But before we discuss Chaucer and his importance, these are some of his earlier predecessors you can call them who what do you call who pitched the ground, who paved the ground, who paved the way for him. So, you have Lazamon and his work *Brut*, you have Robert of Gloucester, and you have Robert Manning of Brunne, these are some of you know the early writers in the Middle English poetry so something in early 13th century and 14th century.

So, in *Brut* it deals with the history of Brutus from the time he lands into Britain to his death. So, it is it is composed in 16000 alliterative lines something like this, but from here we basically need to come to Chaucer. Chaucer is a very important figure for us.

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Before we come to Chaucer, these are some of the works that are available to us. I quickly go through it just take a look at it you know "The Owl and the Nightingale" "The Cursor Mundi", "Ormulum".

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And these are some other ones, "Pearl", "Purity", "Patience", "Guy of Warwick", "King Horn", Havelock of "Havelock the Dane", but more than all these things what draws my attention and what I would like to draw your attention towards is "Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight" this is another well known poetic work, almost you can call it a semi epic. Semi epic

kind of a work alliterative and it deals with a particular genre of romance poetry it is called it belongs to the genre called chivalrous romance “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”.

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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

- ✓ Sir Gawain and the Green knight is undoubtedly the finest romances from the Middle English
- ✓ It is a prototype of 14th century chivalric romance and is one of the best known Arthurian stories
- ✓ The beheading game and the exchange of winnings are the two folk motifs that the plot of the poem deals with
- ✓ The plot revolves around Gwain, the knight of King Arthur who takes up a challenge from a mysterious Green Knight
- ✓ The Green Knight (2021 Movie; Director David Lowery; Dev Patel)

Well, here is a very interesting thing you know just a month ago a movie has come out on this folk epic as well Gawain and the Green Knight, it is called *the Green Knight*. It came out just a few weeks ago or maybe a month ago directed by David Lowery and Dev Patel in one of the lead characters; it depicts the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Again as a celluloid epic you can call this the Green Knight, a celluloid effect; a beautiful rendition, please remember we call such renditions as intersemiotic translations it is an interesting aside translation. It is a kind of a translation because you translate a work written into a celluloid medium so, it is a kind of an intersemiotic one.

Because the medium of translation is different from the print to the celluloid it is a different medium. So, this kind of translation is called an intersemiotic translation. It has its own constraints to translate a work written here into bringing it onto a screen or onto a stage it requires a lot of sacrifices lot of constraints, nevertheless it is a wonderful attempt by the director. So, you can even watch it if you want to know what this epic is all about you can as well watch the movie.

In Middle English undoubtedly, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” is one of the finest romances and as I said it belongs to the genre called chivalric romance. Again it deals with

the heroic adventures of a Knight called Gawain and his battle with a mysterious knight called the Green Knight. You have lot of folk themes here.

There is a mysterious knight who appears and he almost defeats everybody, but what happens is, Sir Gawain who is a valiant knight challenges him and he almost in the duel he kills Green Knight, he beheads him. And strangely after losing his head, the Green Knight after a while he gets up picks his head back places it and says remember this fight is not yet over and disappears and, another date for the fight is set maybe, I mean about a year after.



So, then Sir Gawain how does he tackle the Green Knight; how does he prepare all these things forms the crux of this particular epic, a very beautiful one. Of course, remember when we are readin,g if at all we attempt to read Old English poetry or Middle English poetry we may come across it may even at structurally speaking it may sound; I mean it may look a little strange because you have lot many characters that you and I do not use in English today, you know.

So, there is a presence of lot many characters so and even language is slightly you know removed. So, all these possibilities are there. So, nevertheless that these are things that we have to keep in mind.

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The Father of English Poetry

Let's now discuss **Geoffrey Chaucer**



- ✓ Chaucer is the greatest English poet from the Middle Ages
- ✓ His contribution to the field of literature is immense
- ✓ He is the first writer to be buried in the Poets' Corner, in Westminster Abbey
- ✓ Chaucer's poems are divided into three stages: French, Italian, and the English
- ✓ With his power of words, narrative, and humor, Chaucer stands out as one of the finest poets
- ✓ He brought in the decasyllabic line from France to England
- ✓ The seven-line stanza a b a b b c c is attributed to Chaucer and is called Chaucerian or rime royale

From the Green Knight we move on to Geoffrey Chaucer. Geoffrey Chaucer is called and rightfully so, the father of English literature, the father of a English poetry because is a the

first major English poet of course, though the earliest English poets that credit goes to someone else, Chaucer is the best one of the best English poets the first best English poet you can call.

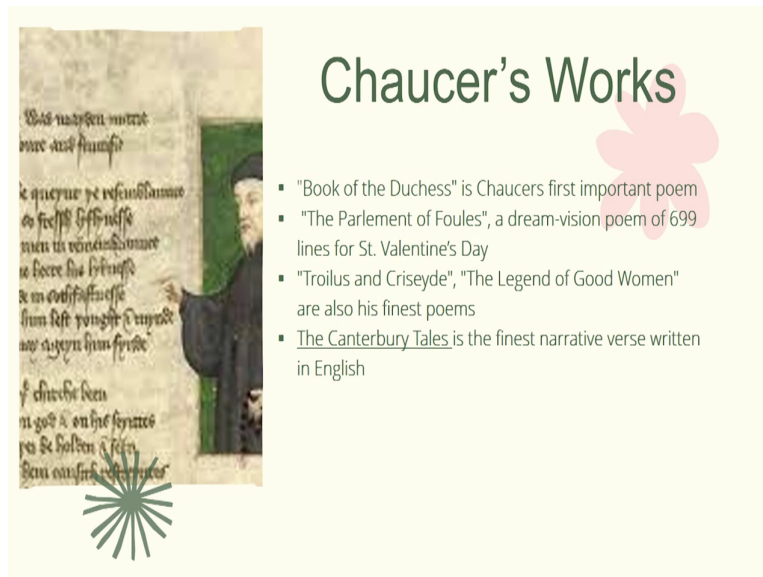
Therefore, rightly he is called the father of English poetry he has several works to his credit, but before we discuss we need to know that you know his poems are divided into three stages French, Italian and English, he was a scholar. In fact, he was a scholar, also worked in the court in some capacity in some diplomatic capacity therefore he was well versed with a many languages so, he has his writings in English as well.

So, because of his sheer you know ability to use words because of his narrative capabilities and the effortless ease with which he introduces humor he stands out Chaucer stands out as one of the preeminent poets in English poetry. And he also has to his credit introduction of decasyllabic line from France to England, ten syllables.

Meter, rime and rhythm again there two technical for us and probably maybe we can discuss them in another course, but they are a part of they are technical part of English literature, but for time being know that he is credited to have brought in a decasyllabic line a ten syllable lines from France to England because of course, because of his vast exposure to French literature as well.

And again, the seven-line stanza with a rhyme scheme of a b a b b c c a kind of you know a b a b b c c a seven-line stanza is again attributed to Chaucer and this particular rime scheme when you use it. This particular rhyme scheme in your poetry it is called a Chaucerian you know rime scheme or you can even call it rime royale. That is his contribution to English poetry as such when it comes to his works.

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Chaucer's Works

- "Book of the Duchess" is Chaucer's first important poem
- "The Parlement of Foules", a dream-vision poem of 699 lines for St. Valentine's Day
- "Troilus and Criseyde", "The Legend of Good Women" are also his finest poems
- The Canterbury Tales is the finest narrative verse written in English

He has extraordinary works. In fact, all of them are available to us fortunately we have them and some of them are even available to us in modern English as I said we may not be able to read the works the way he has written. Because as I said that language is slightly different you and I may not be familiar with it fortunately most of them have you know been retranslated into modern English therefore, nothing should prevent us from reading his works.

Especially, I want you to draw your attention towards *The Canterbury Tales* you know, *The Canterbury Tales* one of the finest narrative was written in English. The *Canterbury Tales* recounts on their, it is a kind of a pilgrimage tale, on their way to Canterbury many of the pilgrims they stay at a place and start recounting their tales, their life and everything.


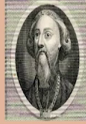

So, kind of it gives you especially if you want to get a kind of an anthropological understanding of England at that particular point of time this work particularly helps us. Because it gives us a glimpse into a cross section of the British society at that particular time *Canterbury Tales*.

You also have "The Parliament of Fowles", another you know very interesting dream vision kind of a poem which is dedicated to Saint Valentine on a Saint Valentine's day probably for a performance during the Saint Valentine's day it must have been composed "The Parliament of Fowles" and "Book of the Duchess", the "Troilus and Criseyde", two the "Troilus and Criseyde", "The Legend of Good Women".

So, these are some of his remarkable works of course, what I have on my left hand side is you know to your right hand side you know a painting of it and maybe an excerpt from one of his tales you can just take a look at it out of historical curiosity alright.

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Chaucer's Contemporaries

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| William Langland | John Gower | John Barbour |
| is known for his poem "The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman" where he critiques the vices of the Church and brought forth the struggles and virtues of common people | is known for his poem "Confessio Amantis" with "conventional allegorical setting, with a disquisition on the seven deadly sins, illustrated by many anecdotes" (Albert 41). He used octosyllabic couplet with great deft in the poem | Scottish poet of great merit. He authored "Bruce", a lengthy poem on the history of Scotland's struggle for freedom. The battle of Bannockburn is the central incident of the poem |

From Chaucer, we move on to some of Chaucer's notable contemporaries you can say if not equal in merit, but of course, they have their contributions to English literature too. William Langland, especially "Piers Plowman", is his very well known work. William Langland "The vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman" where he critiques the vices and foibles of the church.

In fact, it is a; it is a powerful poetic critique of religion. So, as opposed to that he brings forth the virtues the struggles and the beauty of the common people; he elevates the struggles of the common people to the level of you know a beautiful epic in his work especially Piers the Plowman.

We have John Gower's "Confessio Amantis," his well known work, Again, it is set in an allegorical context. And it talks about the seven deadly sins and illustrated by several anecdotes, a very interesting one as well these are of course, historically significant works and you have John Barbour these are some of the well known contemporaries of Chaucer.

So, before we wind up this class, let us quickly recall what we did in this class. We discussed the early origins of English poetry, somewhere how it began in 8th century, 9th century, the

first English poets we came face to face with, then we familiarized ourselves with their concerns and themes and how the poetry at that point of time is religious and heroic.

And then we discussed us Beowulf especially, Beowulf how that is a remarkable epic folk epic that discusses the adventures of Beowulf in a beautiful metrically well composed lines.

We discussed another important semi epic you can recall them; Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight and then from there we came across you know Geoffrey Chaucer his contribution to English poetry. And how he is rightly called the father of English poetry and later of course, some of the well known Chaucer contemporaries.

In the next class, we are going to discuss English poetry post Chaucer's period especially 15th century onwards, until then keep recalling some of the important points that we have discussed and we will meet you in the next class.

Thank you.