

## Lec 2

### Anglo-Saxon

In Anglo-Saxon Poetry There are two types of Old English poetry: the heroic, the sources of which are pre-Christian Germanic myth, history, and custom; and the Christian. Although nearly all Old English poetry is preserved in only four manuscripts—indicating that what has survived is not necessarily the best or most representative—much of it is of high literary quality. Moreover, Old English heroic poetry is the earliest extant in all of Germanic literature. It is thus the nearest we can come to the oral pagan literature of Germanic culture, and is also valuable as a source of knowledge about many aspects of Germanic society. The 7th-century work known as *Widsith*, 7th-century Anglo-Saxon poem found in the Exeter Book (manuscript volume of Old English religious and secular poetry, of various dates of composition, compiled c.975 and given to Exeter Cathedral by Bishop Leofric (d. 1072).). It is an account of the wanderings of a Germanic minstrel and of the legends he relates. The poem gives an excellent description of minstrel life in the Germanic heroic age.

It is important to understand past literary accomplishments in order to appreciate current trends in literature. It enables us to comprehend what life was like in long-ago eras. The oral tradition has also given us a glimpses of long-dead societies.

Almost all of the literature of this period was orally transmitted ,so as a result of this, Anglo-Saxon poetry tends to be highly rhythmical, much like other forms of verse that emerged from oral traditions. Anglo-Saxon poetry creates rhythm through a unique system of alliteration. Syllables are not counted as they are in traditional European meters, but instead the length of the line is determined by a pattern of stressed syllables that begin with the same consonant cluster. The result of this style of poetry is a harsher, more rough sound and a rhythm that sounds more like a chant than a traditional song.

Some of the most important works from this period include the epic [Beowulf](#), [Caedmon's](#) hymn, [Bede's Death Song](#), and the wisdom poetry found in the Exeter Book such as *The Seafarer*, and *The Wanderer*.

[Beowulf](#), a complete epic, is the oldest surviving Germanic epic as well as the longest and most important poem in Old English. It originated as a pagan saga transmitted orally from one generation to the next . The version of *Beowulf* that is extant was composed by a Christian poet, probably early in the 8th cent. However, Christian themes found in the epic, although affecting in themselves, are not included into the essentially pagan tale. The epic celebrates the hero's fearless and bloody struggles against monsters and courage, honor, and loyalty as the chief virtues in a world of brutal force .

#### Quotes for Beowulf

"Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed  
and condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel  
the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:  
Cain got no good from committing that murder

because the Almighty made him anathema  
and out of the curse of his exile there sprang  
ogres and elves and evil phantoms"

It's no accident that the only Biblical story specifically referred to in *Beowulf* is the tale of Cain and Abel, two brothers who took part in a murderous feud. In medieval Scandinavia, tribe against tribe and clan against clan often came down to fratricidal combat. Grendel (Character in the poem) represents the ultimate evil in this culture because he's the descendant of a man who killed his brother. Another villain of the poem, Unferth, is also condemned by the narrator because he killed his brothers.

## **Style of Literature Or Literary Techniques**

The poetry of the Anglo-Saxons is defined by the following characteristics:

1. Anglo-Saxon poetry is written in blank verse. The term blank verse means that there is no end rhyme occurring from line to line.
2. Anglo-Saxon poetry typically depicts the problems which arise as the theology of the Church (Christianity) and the theology of the Pagan world are played off of, and against, each other.
3. The use of caesura (a pause in the middle of a line of poetry- like taking a breath) is very common. Given that during this period there was no written common written language, the poetry of the Anglo's was sung by scop. The caesura allowed for the scop to breathe while reciting long and detailed poems and epics. The caesura was typically placed after the second foot in the line of poetry. There were four feet in each line and the breath allowed for a pause to happen in the middle of each line.
4. A commonly used poetic device was alliteration. Alliteration is the repetition of a consonant sound within a line of poetry. This added to the sing-song effect of the time.
5. Kennings were another poetic device commonly used in Anglo poetry. The Kenning is a metaphorical phrase used to compare a abstract description to something less elegant in regards to verbiage. An example of this would be "battle sweat". Battle sweat is a kenning for blood.

6. Like many of the epics during this time, the poetry of the Anglos was meant to be a moral lesson to those listening. A sort of fable, the poems taught lessons on life and righteousness.