Themes Treated In Selected Works From Old English Literature

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received:03/06/2024 Published:12/09/2024	This review paper deals with the themes treated in Old English literature. The literature presented at this period was produced in Old English which is the earliest form of English and is a set of Anglo-Frisian dialects. Caedmon Hymn, The Dream of the Rood, and Beowulf represent the earliest and most popular works in Old English Literature. A qualitative synthesis was used to gather the information about the works of the period. Old English literature is rich with themes of religion, life and death, myth and war, heroic tradition. **Keywords:** Beowulf, Caedmon Hymn, heroic tradition, The Dream of the Rood, life and death, Old English, themes, myth and war.

Introduction

During ancient times, the earliest written records in what is now called Great Britain were in multiple languages. Latin was common because of the four-century occupation, and there was also written forms of Gaelic, Irish, and Welsh languages. However, a significant portion of the literature was passed down through oral storytelling and was not often written down until later eras. (Piero, 2003)

Old English is the language found in the oldest surviving manuscripts, which are more than 1500 years old. Throughout history, these texts have been shaped by Norse and Viking, Anglo-Saxon, and French invaders, as well as various regional dialects. (Piero, 2003)

English literature did not begin to resemble the English language we use today until around 1400, with the emergence of Middle English. The language had evolved further by the time of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, which were both published in 1611. (Piero, 2003)

The concepts and subjects examined in the literature produced between the decline of the Roman Empire and the Elizabethan era are recognizable and have enduring relevance for contemporary audiences. These works address universal themes, concerns, symbols, and emotions that are shared across various forms of storytelling, introspection, verse, and spiritual contemplation.

The depiction of themes such as love, heroism, joy, sorrow, solace, optimism, belief, doubt, achievement, disappointment, existence, mortality, and the transient nature of human experiences is a central focus in artistic expressions. This creative representation of diverse human concerns has been captured through a vivid and vibrant language, spanning from historical origins to contemporary times.

1. The Emergence of Oral Tradition in Literature:
Researchers have discovered that oral literature is the initial form of literary expression in all societies. The earliest renditions of religious texts such as the Bible and the Koran, as well as ancient tales like Gilgamesh and the Bhagavad Gita, and classical Greek epics like those of Homer, were orally transmitted across generations, undergoing alterations, additions, omissions, and embellishments before being transcribed into written form. Notably, the Koran has remained unchanged throughout its history. In English literature, the earliest manifestations of oral tradition often revolve around themes of religion, warfare, and the challenges of daily life, which continue to be prevalent in various forms of writing. (Carter-McRae. 2016)

Fragments of literary manuscripts survive from a huge period of time preceding the Norman Conquest in 1066, however together they form a very large body of work. We can start to picture how much literary expression there must have been if we take into account that the same amount of time has elapsed between the earliest existing work and 1066 as it has between Shakespeare's period and our own. With the exception of a few brilliant flashes and fragments, these centuries are still mostly unknown to us since virtually none of it was recorded in writing and because the majority of what was destroyed later, especially in the 1530s. (Carter-McRae. 2016)

The remaining evidence confirms that the motivations and influences driving the creation, reception, and consumption of literature have remained consistent throughout history. Literature serves to illuminate and reflect societal concerns, reinforce various social, political, and ideological perspectives, and provide comfort and reassurance, akin to the role often played by religious texts. (Carter-McRae. 2016)
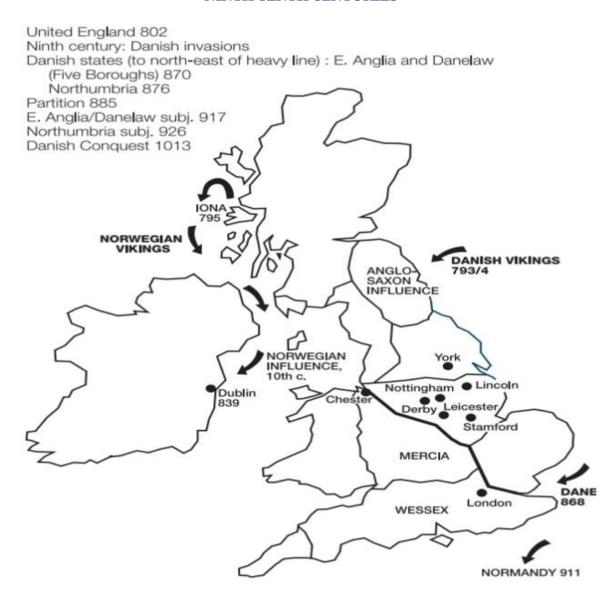
Throughout centuries, the nation underwent various cultural and linguistic influences, with the proliferation of Anglo-Saxon and subsequently English language being a significant factor in shaping the nation's identity. The amalgamation of diverse regional linguistic, cultural, and social components, along with influences from Icelandic, Viking, Latin, French, Germanic, Celtic, and other languages, contributed to the evolution of the English language. (Carter-McRae. 2017 Around 410 AD, the Roman legions withdrew from Britain, followed by Anglo-Saxon and Jutish invasions from North-West Germany around 450 AD. In the early sixth century, King Arthur reigned in Wessex until 537 AD. In 597 AD, Saint Augustine's Christian mission was established at Canterbury. Between 793 and 795 AD, Viking invasions from Danish and Norwegian forces occurred in Scotland, northern, and eastern England. In 802 AD, England was united under King Egbert of Wessex. Throughout the ninth century, there were Danish invasions and occupation of eastern England. In 885 AD, England was partitioned under King Alfred the Great. From 917 to 927 AD, England reoccupied Danish-held territories. In 1013 AD, there was a Danish Conquest of the monarchy, lasting until 1042. In 1066 AD, English King Edward the Confessor died, leading to the election of Harold, son of Godwin, as king. Norwegian forces were defeated at Stamford Bridge near York, and the Norman conquest ensued with Harold's defeat by William of Normandy at Hastings. (Marsden, 2015)

FIFTH CENTURY ENGLAND

Figure 1: The map above illustrates the distribution of Old English dialects, showcasing the prevalence of Mercian in Essex and West Saxon in Sussex and the southwest of Kent. Various factors, including linguistic barriers, influenced the delineation of the seven kingdoms' borders. (Marsden, 2015)

NINTH TENTH CENTURIES

United England 802
Ninth century: Danish invasions
Danish states (to north-east of heavy line) : E. Anglia and Danelaw
    (Five Boroughs) 870
    Northumbria 876
Partition 885
E. Anglia/Danelaw subj. 917
Northumbria subj. 926
Danish Conquest 1013

(Marsden, 2015)

2. Personal and spiritual manifestations:

2.1 The poem "Caedmon's Hymn" and similar works.

The initial literary excerpt known as Caedmon's Hymn dates back to approximately the late seventh century. Legend has it that Caedmon, a lay worker at the Whitby monastery in Northumbria, was inspired by the voice of God. Despite the existence of various Latin hymns during that period, Caedmon's hymn is recognized as the earliest English hymn of praise and the first Christian devotional poem in the English language. The preservation of this hymn is attributed to the monks of Whitby, although it remains uncertain whether the surviving few lines represent the complete composition. (Marsden, 2015)

Christian monks and nuns were the exclusive literate individuals prior to the fourteenth century, serving as the guardians of civilization. It is noteworthy that the predominant language preserved by the English culture from the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes is native Old English, rather than Latin, the language of the church. (Burrow, 2008)

In works such as Caedmon's Hymn, Deor's Lament, and The Seafarer, the perspective of ordinary individuals is emphasized over that of a deliberate 'artist'. These compositions present authentic human emotions and are narrated in the first person, offering personal accounts of various experiences. They frequently establish links to religious texts and encourage the audience to empathize with the narrator by employing the pronoun 'I'. While Caedmon's Hymn is overtly religious, both pieces convey a sense of faith in God. (Burrow, 2008)

Caedmon's Hymn is the only explicitly religious piece, although both works convey a belief in God. It is evident that certain writing styles are beginning to emerge, which will be seen again in subsequent works. One such style involves authors narrating their experiences in the first person and inviting the reader or listener to empathize with their emotions. These verses are often associated with Latin liturgical texts and exegetical commentary. For instance, The Seafarer demonstrates a strong resemblance to contemporary interpretations of the Psalms, despite primarily depicting the daily life of a seafarer (Burrow, 2008).

In Deor's Lament, the speaker reflects on the challenges individuals encounter in their daily lives, referencing the adversities experienced by different Germanic heroes and ultimately expressing hope with the recurring refrain, 'That evil ended.' The narrative transitions to the speaker's personal plight as a renowned minstrel who entertained a prominent household, only to be replaced by a new bard. Notably, this poem is recognized as the earliest known literary work to address the theme of job loss, yet it conveys a message of resilience and the eventual resolution of hardships. (Burrow, 2008)

In his poems Deor speaks about his rival Heorrenda: 'I am able to lament my own unfortunate situation, having previously held a prestigious position as the bard of the Heodenings. Known as Deor, I was highly regarded by my lord. I faithfully served for many years, enjoying a close relationship with my king until Heorrenda arrived. Heorrenda, skilled in song, wrongfully seized the land rights that my benevolent lord had previously bestowed upon me. However, that injustice has now come to an end. May this current adversity also be resolved in due course.' (Burrow, 2008)

The Exeter Book, a collection of poetry dating back to the late tenth century, is currently housed in the library of Exeter Cathedral in Devon. (Heaney, 2007) Among its contents are notable works such as The Seafarer and The Wanderer, along with various other pieces. These elegiac poems explore themes of sorrow, exile, and solitude, reminiscent of Deor's Lament. The poems depict a sense of isolation and lack of support from a noble lord, with memory playing a significant role in the speaker's reflections. The speaker contemplates ancient conflicts and laments the absence of warriors and war horses, echoing the biblical tradition of questioning known as 'Ubi sunt?' (Where are they?). Ultimately, the speaker reflects on the fleeting nature of existence, acknowledging that these figures from the past have seemingly vanished into obscurity. (Heaney, 2007)

The Wonderer states about the absence of warriors: 'One who contemplates these decaying ruins and reflects on the complexities of life must delve into ancient tales of conflict and violence, which may weigh heavily on their heart. The absence of warriors, war-horses, generous gifts, and communal feasts evokes a sense of loss for the vibrant past characterized by joyous celebrations and noble figures. The imagery of the ale-filled cups, armoured warriors, and majestic princes' serves as a poignant reminder of a bygone era that now exists only in distant memory.' Hence, juxtaposition arises between the grandeur of bygone eras and the bleakness of the current moment. Nevertheless, a sense of solace and optimism for what lies ahead persists, often culminating in the promise of a heavenly existence. The persona of the poem, identified as 'the sage, in solitude, pondering,' embodies a recurring archetype in literature, transcending temporal boundaries. (Burrow, 2008) He states: 'Behold! I shall recount the most cherished of dreams'. (The Dream of the Rood)

The church's preservation of texts in Old English indicates its acknowledgment of the distinct linguistic and cultural identity of the English populace. This recognition led to the cultivation of written works in various genres as the language transitioned to Early Middle English by the thirteenth century. (Coss, 1993)

Various literary genres were prevalent during this period, including historical texts such as The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Latin Ecclesiastical History of the English People by the Venerable Bede. Devotional literature, exemplified by works like the twelfth-century Ancrene Rewle, catered to individuals leading a devout religious life. (Coss, 1993)

Additionally, early philosophical writings by figures like Alcuin and Saint Anselm were also prominent. A notable translation of a section of the Christian Bible, specifically the Book of Genesis, was attributed to Caedmon and rendered into Old English from Saxon. This translation aimed to convey a distinct local linguistic and cultural identity while promoting Christianity throughout the region by utilizing the vernacular language. (Coss, 1993)

2.2 The Dream of the Rood, The Seafarer and the likes:
The Dream of the Rood, believed to have been composed towards the conclusion of the seventh century, prominently features Christian themes, with the 'Rood' symbolizing the Cross. One particular interpretation of this work can be found at a standing stone in Dumfriesshire, located in what is presently southern Scotland, near Northumbria where the original manuscript is believed to have originated. (Mooney, 2007)
The Dream of the Rood presents a rich tapestry of words, phrases, and imagery that symbolize Christ and his crucifixion. The narrative features various representations of the cross, such as a tree, a grand golden cross, a

simple bare cross, and a speaking cross that recounts its transformation from a tree to a vessel for Christ. Additionally, the text makes references to Latin hymns and liturgical practices, a characteristic often found in historical writings. It is a vivid and emotive work that juxtaposes themes of joy and sorrow, light and darkness, and the divine realms of heaven and earth. (Liuzza, 2008)

He says about the Christ in his poem: 'Behold! I shall recount a cherished dream that I experienced in the midnight hours while ordinary individuals were in deep slumber. It appeared to me that I beheld a magnificent Tree reaching high into the sky, adorned with the most radiant of crosses enveloped in light.' (The dreams of the Rood) In this context, a level of sophistication and intricacy in expression is evident. The text presupposes that the audience will possess the ability to discern the various references and nuances embedded within it. This quality is fundamental in all forms of writing, as it goes beyond mere reference to convey, illustrate, and exemplify ideas in a refined and intricate manner. Anglo-Saxon literature is particularly rich in vivid imagery. (Marsden, 2015)

In the poem 'The Seafarer,' the protagonist expresses a strong preference for the sea over land and urban settings, citing a deep affection for maritime life despite facing challenges such as rough seas. The term "bark" in this context symbolizes the ship as a whole, while the word "haunted" underscores the speaker's fixation on a spectral or otherworldly influence. (Marsden, 2015)

The Seafarer conjures images of ships and the ocean, while The Dream of the Rood portrays themes of suffering and redemption. The tree, the cross, and the sea serve as symbolic representations of various aspects of human existence in these literary works. Similarly, The Dream of the Rood conveys feelings of solitude, vulnerability in the face of humanity, and the necessity of spiritual support from the cross. The poet states about the cross: 'My deepest longing and ultimate aspiration lie in the Cross, upon which all my hopes are anchored. In the present world, I possess only a limited circle of influential acquaintances.' (The Dream of the Rood)

3. Beowulf:

Beowulf' is a renowned epic poem that holds significant importance in English literature as well as being a captivating adventure narrative. Although the story is set in Scandinavia during the early sixth century, it was crafted in England between the seventh and tenth centuries. The tale revolves around the valorous exploits of Beowulf, a Scandinavian warrior who volunteers to assist King Hrothgar of the Danes in vanquishing a menacing creature named Grendel, who has been wreaking havoc in the kingdom. Beowulf successfully defeats Grendel and later dispatches Grendel's vengeful mother. Upon returning to his homeland, Beowulf ascends to kingship but faces a fatal encounter with a dragon that threatens his realm in his later years. Originally penned in Old English, the poem is typically read in translation due to the significant evolution of the language over time.
Beowulf can be read in many ways:

3.1 The concept of Mortality:
The epic poem Beowulf holds the distinction of being the most renowned extensive composition in Old English. Over the course of history, poets and writers have drawn inspiration from Beowulf, ensuring its enduring presence in English literature and society. Despite recounting historical epic battles and their consequences, the poem's universal themes continue to be a subject of scholarly discourse among academics. In line from 1386–7, the poet says that: 'Each individual residing in this world is inevitably anticipating their ultimate demise.'

The themes of life and death, prevalent in Old English literature, may hold a greater appeal for contemporary readers than tales of heroic battles. Nonetheless, the protagonist's confrontation with Grendel, the monstrous creature from the marshes, carries a timeless significance symbolizing humanity's enduring battle against forces of darkness.

In contemporary times, themes of tragedy, transience, and the sense of futility hold greater significance than the glorification of historical heroism. Heaney employs the term 'nostalgia for world culture,' coined by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, to describe his discovery of the depth and versatility of language—a concept he terms as 'illumination through philology.' (Heaney, 2009)

Beowulf is a classic hero known for his extensive travels and courageous feats. He has ensured the safety of the local residents by defeating the menacing monster Grendel, a formidable adversary in the region. The setting and the people depicted in the poem are of Germanic origin, resonating with a shared heroic heritage within the audience's consciousness.

The narrative commences by alluding to a bygone era, reminiscent of many tales, evoking a vague past (reminiscent of a "once upon a time") where reality and fiction intertwine to craft a captivating storyline.

However, the central figure is a mere mortal, and foreboding and sombre imagery establishes a backdrop for a calamitous resolution. Following a betrayal, a civil conflict ensues. The narrative juxtaposes magnificence and ruin, success and defeat, integrity and deceit, embodying elements that are often found in subsequent literary works. Across various cultures, literature delves into themes of impermanence and mortality, as well as authority and the endeavours to acquire and uphold it.

The language employed in Beowulf is notably imaginative and elaborate, characterized by strong tones and rhythmic patterns. The text features a plethora of synonymous terms for the term 'warrior,' complex adjectives denoting severity, and vivid imagery depicting light, colour, and blood. These linguistic devices serve to emphasize the legendary and epic nature of the narrative. (Heaney, 2009)

The poem celebrates acts of bravery and adventure, while also serving as a tragedy as the hero meets his demise. It pays homage to courageous deeds and past eras. Beowulf, after fifty years of life and his triumph over Grendel, ultimately faces his fate, described as "dauntless" as he confronts a dragon. The narrative shifts to the future, highlighting Wiglaf, Beowulf's kinsman and comrade in battle, who emerges as a figure of authority. The passing of the old hero marks the rise of the young hero. (Headley, 2020) After the outcomes of battles have been determined, the world belongs to the youth, who must then assume the duties of leadership previously held by the warrior king. It is stated in the poem: 'This marked Beowulf's final battle and the conclusion of his endeavours in the world.' (Heaney, 2009)

3.2 Myth and War:

Beowulf can be interpreted through various lenses, such as a myth, a historical account of the Baltic region where it is set, or a hopeful perspective on the future. Central themes of the text revolve around history, time, and the human experience, as it navigates between past events, present circumstances, and aspirations for the future while showcasing its oral storytelling origins. The narrative is rich in human dialogue, vivid imagery, and the call to establish and protect a just societal order against adversaries, symbolized by a dragon and a monster, among the earliest portrayals of 'outsiders' in literature. It is stated in the poem about the battle between the protagonist and Gendel that: 'Beowulf, the son of Ecgtheow, addressed Lord Hygelac, stating that many are aware of the renowned battle between himself and Grendel. He described the intense conflict that took place in the hall where Grendel had previously caused great destruction and grief to the Scylding people. Beowulf emphasized that he had successfully avenged those past wrongs.' (Headley, 2020)

Due to the persistent focus on the historical context of Beowulf, pinpointing its precise date of creation remains elusive, scholars and critics have varied opinions, ranging from the sixth to the eleventh centuries. The traditional belief that it was composed around the middle of the eighth century, approximately in the year 750, has been challenged by more recent studies. Consensus is lacking in this area of research, with significant discord and debate prevailing among scholars. (Carter- McRae, 2017)

Beowulf marks the beginning of a heroic tradition that underscores the significance of power and territory. When recited in a castle hall with accessible language that resonates with all listeners, Beowulf establishes a connection with its audience. The poem is primarily structured around conflicts involving animals and monsters, with a minor subplot featuring human characters. These narratives intertwine through disputes between the factions and discussions on human behaviour. Beowulf offers insights into the qualities of a hero and emphasizes the importance of the hero being a focal point of admiration and interest in society. (Headley, 2020) The poem states that He was considered the most skilled warrior among all men on Earth, able to govern and manage the riches of his noble estate. (Carter- McRae, 2016)

Beowulf is a fitting portrayal of the heroic figure it celebrates due to its depiction of three successive generations of mythical monsters as the primary foes—Grendel's mother, Grendel, and their offspring. It is noteworthy that within a society marked by constant conflict, two contrasting perspectives on warfare emerge almost concurrently. Despite the anonymity of the author of Beowulf, the divergent viewpoints present in the text are discernible.

Conclusion:

Within the Anglo-Saxon literary oral tradition, texts are regarded as poetic expressions, often transcribed years subsequent to their initial creation. These compositions are generally succinct, with the notable outlier being the extensive epic poem Beowulf. They follow a poetic format featuring two lines divided by a central pause, establishing a unique cadence employed by minstrels during their recitations. Furthermore, Old English poetry is distinguished by its prevalent use of alliteration, as demonstrated in pieces like The Ruin.

Old English literature contained a wide range of themes. The works like Caedmon Hymn, Beowulf, The Dream of the Rood and other works of the time give to the greedy readers of Old English a dreamy picture of the era. Themes like life and death, mythical creatures, pictures of grotesque wars. The original texts were written in a language almost non readable by nowadays readers make it impossible to enjoy them, but the translated versions allow them to mesmerize the images of the old times fiction from a side and real life from another side.

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