

The Middle English Period - History of English Literature

Generated: Jan 26, 2026

The Middle English Period (1066 - 1500)

The Middle English Period started with the Norman Conquest in 1066 and ended around 1500.

This period is divided into three parts:

- **Anglo-Norman Period** (1066-1340)
- **Age of Chaucer** (1340-1400)
- **Barren Age** (1400-1500)

The Norman Conquest and Its Effect

In 1066, William the Conqueror from Normandy (France) defeated the English King Harold in the Battle of Hastings. This is called the Norman Conquest. After that, the Normans ruled England. They brought the French language and culture with them. French became the language of the court, law, and high society. This changed the English language. Many French and Latin words entered English, and Old English slowly turned into Middle English. Because of the Norman Conquest, the English language changed a lot. Old English grammar became simpler. Many French and Latin words were added. This new form of English was called Middle English. Writers started using English again instead of Latin or French. This helped literature grow in the common people's language.

Literature in Vernacular Language

Before, most books were written in Latin or French. But during the Middle English Period, writers started using English, the common people's language. This is called "Vernacular Literature." It helped more people enjoy and understand literature. Chaucer was one of the main writers who used English for serious poetry.

The Hundred Years' War (1337-1453)

This war was between England and France. It started when King Edward III of England claimed the throne of France. The war lasted 116 years, but it is called the Hundred Years' War. It created strong national feelings in England. English people began to feel proud of their language and culture. That's why many writers started writing in English again.

The Black Death (1348-1349)

The Black Death was a deadly disease that killed millions of people in Europe, including England. This happened between 1348 and 1349. Because so many people died, the **feudal system** (a system where lords had power over poor farmers) started to break down. The poor people began to demand better lives. This social change is reflected in the literature of the time.

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The Role of the Church and Bible Translation

Religion was very important during this period. The Church had a lot of power. But some people wanted to read the Bible in English, not Latin. **John Wycliffe** translated The Bible from Latin to English between 1382 and 1395. He believed people should read the Bible themselves. This was a big step in making religion more personal and simple for common people.

William Caxton and the Printing Press

In 1476, **William Caxton** set up the first printing press in England. Before this, books were written by hand. Caxton's press made books cheaper and easier to get. He printed many important works, including Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The printing press helped English literature grow faster.

Geoffrey Chaucer and His Contribution to English Literature

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400) is the most important writer of the Middle English Period. He is called the **Father of English Literature** and **the Father of Modern English Poetry**. He was an all-round person. Chaucer was a poet, philosopher, court official, diplomat, soldier, and astronomer. He knew English, French, and Latin. He was also a soldier and participated in the Hundred Years' War. Chaucer made English a respected language for literature. Before him, people used Latin or French. He showed that English could be used for serious poetry. He understood people deeply and showed their character, dreams, and problems with honesty and fun. That is why he is called **the Representative Poet of the age** and **the Father of English Poetry**. Chaucer's literary career has three stages:

(a) French Period (1360-1370): In this stage, he was influenced by French poets. His early poem, *The Book of the Duchess* is a dream-vision poem written in this style.

(b) Italian Period (1370-1385): He visited Italy and was inspired by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. He wrote *Troilus and Criseyde*, a long tragic love story.

(c) English Period (1385-1400): This is Chaucer's best and last phase. He wrote "**The Canterbury Tales**" during this period. His poetry became original and powerful.

The Canterbury Tales is Chaucer's most famous and best work. Chaucer planned to write 120 stories. He finished 23, and one was partially finished. Among the stories 22 were verse tales, and 2 were prose tales. However, the rest remain unfinished because of Geoffrey Chaucer's sudden death. There are 30 pilgrims in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Including Chaucer, there are 31 pilgrims. The pilgrims belong to different classes of society, like the Knight, the Miller, the Merchant, the Cook, and the Wife of Bath. Each pilgrim tells a story, and the stories are full of fun, wisdom, and life lessons. This book gives a clear picture of medieval English life. It mixes serious and funny tales. Chaucer used realistic characters, humour, and moral lessons. It shows how different people lived and thought at that time.

Important Features of the Middle English Period

- **The Norman Conquest (1066)**
- **Change from Old English to Middle English**
- **Use of Vernacular Language (Regional language).**

Romance and Chivalry:

Love and bravery became very popular in stories. Many books were written about knights, ladies, and heroic adventures. These stories showed the values of honor, loyalty, and love.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

is a famous example. Another is

Le Morte d'Arthur

by Thomas Malory. These works reflect the spirit of chivalry.

Religious Themes in Literature: Religion played a big role in this period. Many books had religious ideas and moral lessons. Writers talked about saints, heaven, sin, and holy life. Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* also included religious characters and themes. People wrote stories to teach good behavior through religion.

Allegory and Moral Lessons: Writers used a style called allegory. In allegory, the story and characters stand for ideas or moral lessons. It helped writers speak about problems in society

and religion. One great example is *Piers Plowman* by William Langland. It shows the struggles of poor people and the need for justice and truth.

Courtly Love: Courtly love means ideal romantic love. It often portrays romantic relationships where the woman is typically married and the man is unmarried. It was about respect, loyalty, and beauty. Writers wrote poems and stories on this topic. It showed how lovers should act.

Manuscript Culture (Before Printing): In the early Middle English Period, there was no printing press. So, all books were written and copied by hand. They used paper or animal skin. Every book was expensive and rare. People read books carefully because they were valuable. This culture continued until the printing press was invented in 1476.

Alliterative Verse: In poetry, alliteration was very common. Alliteration means repeating the same consonant sounds at the beginning of words. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a good example of this style. Later, poets used rhymes and rhythms influenced by French poetry. But in the beginning, alliterative verse was still strong.

Remarkable Writers and Literary Works of the Middle English Period

John Wycliffe (1324-84), the father of English prose, Morning Star:

- **The Bible (translated into English from Latin)**
- John Gower (1325-1408)
- Confessio Amantis (1390)

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400), Father of Modern English Poetry, Father of English Literature, The greatest English poet of Middle age:

- **Troilus and Criseyde (1387)**
- **Canterbury Tales (1385-1400)**

William Langland (1332-1386)

- **"Piers Plowman" (1362)**

Sir Thomas Malory (1400 - 1470)

- “Le Morte d' Arthur” (1485), the first romance in prose

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Caution:

“Morte d'Arthur”, a poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

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