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THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLISH LITERARY TRADITION: FROM ORAL BALLADS OF WRITTEN CANON

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ABSTRACT. This article discusses the historical transformation of English literary tradition from its oral origins to the establishment of a written canon. It analyzes how oral ballads, once transmitted by word of mouth, gradually evolved into written literary works that shaped English cultural and intellectual history. The study highlights the interconnectedness between oral creativity and written authorship, demonstrating that the English literary identity is deeply rooted in both communal and individual forms of expression.

Key words: Oral tradition, ballads, written canon, English literature, authorship, literary evolution.

INTRODUCTION

The development of English literature mirrors the evolution of English society and thought. Before the invention of writing and printing, stories and songs were preserved through oral performance. These early oral ballads were not merely entertainment; they were carriers of cultural memory, moral values, and historical events. As literacy expanded, these oral narratives were gradually recorded, giving rise to written literature and the formal English canon. The transition from oral to written forms marks one of the most significant cultural shifts in literary history. This change redefined authorship, creativity, and the role of the audience. From collective memory to individual imagination, the evolution of English literary tradition reveals how language, culture, and art developed hand in hand.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND METHODOLOGY

The study employs historical and analytical approaches to understand the progression of English literature from oral to written forms. First, the historical analysis focuses on how early oral poetry, such as Beowulf, The Seafarer, and traditional English and Scottish ballads, served as foundations for later literary works. These compositions relied heavily on repetition, rhythm, and formulaic expressions to aid memory and performance. Second, a comparative method is used to contrast oral features communal authorship, fluidity, and performance with written characteristics like textual stability, individual creativity, and structured narrative form. Third, the theoretical





framework draws on literary historians such as Roger Ascham, Raymond Williams, and Walter Ong, who emphasize that the shift from orality to literacy fundamentally changed human consciousness and cultural organization. The methodology thus integrates both literary criticism and cultural history to present a comprehensive view of the English literary evolution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that the oral and written traditions of English literature are not separate entities but part of a continuous cultural development. In the Anglo-Saxon period, oral storytelling dominated. Epic poems like Beowulf were transmitted by scop poets who performed in royal courts. These tales contained elements of heroism, morality, and identity that later influenced written texts. With the Middle English period, the idea of the “author” emerged. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* reflects the fusion of oral narrative techniques dialogue, humor, repetition with written artistic control. The Renaissance and Early Modern period marked the rise of print culture. William Caxton’s printing press (1476) transformed literature into a permanent, widely accessible medium. Writers like Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, and John Milton expanded the written canon, enriching it with philosophical depth and artistic innovation.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, literary criticism and education formalized the idea of a canon texts considered essential to English cultural identity. This period emphasized the study of “great authors” and established literature as a field of academic inquiry. Finally, in the modern era, scholars such as C.S. Lewis and Raymond Williams questioned the exclusivity of the canon, suggesting that oral and popular forms folk songs, local tales, and non-elite voices also deserve recognition as part of the English literary heritage. Thus, the evolution from oral to written tradition was not a replacement but an expansion, ensuring the preservation of collective memory while allowing for individual creativity and intellectual reflection.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of English literature from oral ballads to written texts represents more than a shift in medium it marks the evolution of human thought and artistic identity. Oral tradition laid the foundation for collective storytelling, while written literature immortalized those stories through text, authorship, and criticism. The English literary canon, therefore, is both a product of cultural memory and a testament to the creative spirit that has shaped English civilization. Recognizing this dual heritage allows modern readers to appreciate the continuity and richness of English literary tradition.

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