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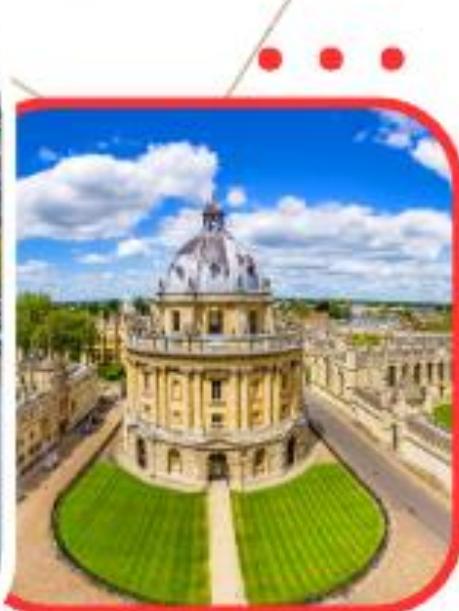
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THE PRE-RENAISSANCE PERIOD IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Mamadaliyeva Marifatkhon Rakhmatullo kizi
Chirchik State Pedogical University
E-Mail: Mamadaliyevamarifatxon@Gmail.Com
Scientific Supervisor: **Khamitov Eldorbek Erkinovich**
E-Mail: Khamitoveldorbek@Gmail.Com

Abstract: The Tre-Renaissance period in English literature refers to the time before the cultural rebirth of the 16th century. This era, mainly covering the Middle Ages, was deeply influenced by religion, chivalry, and morality. English writers began to develop a national identity through their works, preparing the ground for the coming Renaissance. This study analyzes the main characteristics, authors, and themes of pre-Renaissance English literature and its contribution to the development of later literary traditions.

Keywords: Pre-Renaissance, Middle Ages, English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer, morality, religion

Introduction: The Pre-Renaissance period, often called the Medieval or Middle English period (roughly from the 11th to the 15th century), was a time of transition in English culture and language. After the Norman Conquest of 1066, English literature began to develop under the influence of French and Latin traditions. Religious belief and feudal society shaped most literary works. Despite the dominance of the Church, writers slowly began to explore human experience and individuality. The aim of this paper is to examine how pre-Renaissance English literature reflected medieval life and paved the way for the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance

Methods: The study is based on a qualitative and historical-literary approach. Primary texts such as Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, and Piers Plowman by William Langland were analyzed to identify major themes and stylistic features. Secondary sources including academic books and journal articles were used to interpret how social, political, and religious contexts influenced literature during the period.

Results: The analysis shows that pre-Renaissance English literature was characterized by three main features:

1. Religious and Moral Themes: Most works focused on moral lessons, faith, and the relationship between man and God. Examples include The Cursor Mundi and medieval miracle plays.

2. Development of the English Language: The use of Middle English became widespread, especially in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose The Canterbury Tales helped standardize the language.

3. Emergence of Human and Social Concerns: Writers began to depict real human experiences and social classes. Chaucer's characters represented

various aspects of medieval society, showing humor, irony, and moral reflection.

Discussion: The results indicate that the pre-Renaissance period was a bridge between the old religious worldview and the new humanistic thinking of the Renaissance. While the Church remained central, authors began to question social norms and emphasize personal values. The use of English instead of Latin made literature more accessible to ordinary people. Works such as Piers Plowman criticized corruption in society and the Church, showing the beginning of social awareness. Chaucer's vivid characters and realistic style reflected a growing interest in human nature and individuality, key ideas that later defined Renaissance literature.

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Literature (c. 450–1066)

Old English literature was primarily oral and composed in alliterative verse rather than rhyme. It reflected the harsh realities of life, bravery in battle, and loyalty to one's lord — central values of Anglo-Saxon culture. *Epic Poetry:* The most famous example, Beowulf, combines pagan heroism with Christian moral lessons. It explores courage, fate, and the struggle between good and evil. Other heroic poems include The Battle of Maldon and The Wanderer.

Religious Poetry: Poets like Caedmon and Cynewulf used verse to express biblical themes and Christian devotion. Their works, such as The Dream of the Rood, blend spiritual vision with poetic imagination. *Prose*: Old English prose developed mainly through religious writings. King Alfred the Great (9th century) encouraged learning and translation, helping preserve English as a written language. Overall, Anglo-Saxon literature was both heroic and moral, rooted in the oral traditions of storytelling but shaped by Christian faith.

Middle English Literature (1066–1500)

After the Norman Conquest of 1066, England's language and culture changed dramatically. The ruling class spoke French, while Latin remained the language of religion and learning. Over time, these influences blended with native English to form Middle English, and new literary forms appeared. *Religious Literature:* Most early Middle English writings were religious, including sermons, saints' lives (hagiographies), and moral poems like The Owl and the Nightingale. *Romances and Chivalric Tales:* Knightly adventures became popular, often inspired by French and Celtic legends. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, part of the Arthurian tradition, beautifully combines moral values, chivalry, and supernatural elements. *Drama:* Religious plays known as mystery plays, miracle plays, and morality plays became widespread. These were performed by local guilds and taught Christian values to ordinary people. Examples include Everyman and The Second Shepherd's Play. *Social*

Themes: Toward the end of the Middle Ages, literature began to deal with real social issues, reflecting changes in class, faith, and human understanding.

This period gradually moved from collective, religious values toward a more individual and realistic portrayal of human life — a step closer to Renaissance thinking.

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