



SHRIMATI INDIRA GANDHI COLLEGE

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TIRUCHIRAPPALLI – 620 002.

STUDY MATERIAL

SEMESTER:I

COURSE TITLE: HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE-I

COURSE CODE:22ASACEN1

Short Answer Questions (2–3 sentences each)

1. Who were the Anglo-Saxons?

The Anglo-Saxons were Germanic tribes (Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) who settled in Britain after the Roman withdrawal in the 5th century.

2. What is Old English?

Old English is the earliest form of the English language used between 450 and 1066 AD.

3. Name the four major dialects of Old English.

Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish.

4. What is 'Beowulf'?

Beowulf is an epic poem written in Old English, portraying a heroic tale of a warrior who battles monsters.

Beowulf, a Geatish warrior who defeats Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon.

5. What is a kenning?

A kenning is a compound metaphor, like "whale-road" for sea.

6. What themes are common in Old English poetry?

Heroism, exile, fate (wyrd), and the conflict between Christianity and paganism.

7. Name one elegiac poem from the Old English period.

The Wanderer.

8. What is The Seafarer about?

It describes a sailor's hardships and reflections on life, God, and the sea.

9. Who was Caedmon?

Caedmon was the first known English poet; he composed religious verse like Caedmon's Hymn.

10. Who wrote the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle?

It was commissioned by King Alfred and written by multiple scribes.

11. What is alliteration?

Repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words, used frequently in Old English poetry.

12. What replaced Old English after 1066?

Middle English, influenced heavily by Norman French.

13.What is the Exeter Book?

A manuscript containing a collection of Old English poems and riddles.

14.How were Old English texts preserved?

Through hand-written manuscripts by monks in monasteries.

15.Why is Beowulf significant?

It is the oldest surviving epic in English literature.

16.What is the poetic form of Old English poetry?

It often uses alliteration, caesura, and no rhyme.

17.What is a heroic ideal in Old English?

Values such as bravery, loyalty, and honor in battle.

18.Name a manuscript that preserves Beowulf.

The Nowell Codex (part of the Cotton Vitellius A.xv manuscript).

19.Who is called the Father of English Poetry?

Geoffrey Chaucer is called the Father of English Poetry for his pioneering role in shaping Middle English literature.

20.Which dialect did Chaucer use in his writings?

The East Midland dialect of Middle English, which later became the basis of Standard English

21.Name Chaucer's major narrative poems.

The Book of the Duchess, The House of Fame, The Parliament of Fowls, Troilus and Criseyde, The Canterbury Tales

22.What is a 'fabliau'?

A short, humorous, and often bawdy tale, common in The Canterbury Tales (e.g., The Miller's Tale).

23.What is The Book of the Duchess about?

It is an elegy mourning the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster.

24.What themes does Chaucer often explore?

Love, social satire, morality, religion, and human nature.

25.Name two Post-Chaucerian Scottish poets.

Robert Henryson and William Dunbar.

26.What are the origins of English drama?

English drama originated from religious rituals and church liturgy, especially during the Middle Ages, evolving from Latin liturgical performances.

27.What are miracle plays?

Miracle plays depict the lives and miracles of saints, especially popular during the medieval period.

28.What are mystery plays?

Mystery plays dramatize Biblical stories, especially events from the Old and New Testaments.

29.What are morality plays?

Morality plays are allegorical dramas where abstract virtues and vices are personified, teaching moral lessons (e.g., Everyman).

30.What is an interlude?

Interludes are short, secular, often humorous plays performed between courses of a banquet or at court.

31.Who were the University Wits?

32.What are masques?

Courtly performances combining music, dance, and elaborate scenery, popular during the Stuart period

33.What happened to drama during the Puritan period?

Theatres were closed and drama was banned by the Puritans from 1642 to 1660.

34.Why is the period called the "Milton Age"?

The age is named after John Milton, whose literary contributions—especially *Paradise Lost*—tower over other writers of the time. His works reflect the moral and religious concerns of the Puritan movement.

35.What are the main characteristics of Milton's poetry?

Milton's poetry is marked by classical influences, blank verse, elevated language, and religious and philosophical themes.

36.What is the theme of *Paradise Lost*?

The central theme is the fall of man—Adam and Eve's disobedience and the consequences of their sin. It also explores free will, divine justice, and redemption.

37.What is *Areopagitica* about?

Areopagitica is a prose pamphlet written by Milton in 1644 defending the right to free speech and opposing censorship.

38.What is the Restoration in English history?

The Restoration refers to the return of Charles II to the English throne in 1660, marking the end of the Puritan Commonwealth and the revival of monarchy and theatres.

39Name any two important works by John Dryden.

Absalom and Achitophel and *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*.

40.What was the general tone of Restoration literature?

Witty, satirical, realistic, and often cynical, reflecting the corruption and extravagance of court life.

41.What is meant by Comedy of Manners?

A type of Restoration comedy that satirizes the manners and affectations of high society.

42.What is Dryden's contribution to literary criticism?

His *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* laid the foundation for modern English literary criticism.

Answer in paragraph form:

1. Describe the structure and style of Old English poetry.

Old English poetry is marked by a distinct structure that relies heavily on alliteration and strong rhythmic patterns rather than rhyme. Each line typically has two halves separated by a caesura (a pause), with alliteration linking the two parts. The language is rich in kennings, which are metaphorical expressions such as “bone-house” for the body or “whale-road” for the sea. The poems often follow a four-stress line, where the stressed syllables carry the musical and thematic weight. The tone is usually serious, and the subject matter often deals with heroism, fate, exile, loss, and spiritual reflection. The style reflects an oral tradition where scops (bards) would recite poetry from memory, preserving stories and cultural values.

2. Discuss the historical background of the Old English period.

The Old English period spans from around 450 to 1066 AD, beginning with the arrival of Germanic tribes—Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—in Britain after the fall of the Roman Empire. These tribes brought their own languages and customs, which formed the basis of Old English. Over time, they established several kingdoms such as Wessex, Mercia, and Northumbria. In the 7th century, the Christianization of England began with missionaries like St. Augustine, which greatly influenced literature, introducing Latin literacy and religious themes. The Viking invasions starting in the late 8th century brought destruction but also cultural exchange. The period ended with the Norman Conquest in 1066, which introduced French influence and marked the beginning of the Middle English period.

3. Describe the narrative structure of The Canterbury Tales.

The Canterbury Tales follows a frame narrative structure, where a central story—about a group of pilgrims traveling to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury—encapsulates a series of smaller stories told by the pilgrims. Chaucer introduces 30 pilgrims, each representing different social classes and professions, such as the Knight, the Miller, the Prioress, and the Wife of Bath. The Host proposes

that each pilgrim tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the return journey, but only 24 tales were completed. Each tale is preceded by a prologue, offering insight into the character and often reflecting or contrasting with the content of the tale. This layered storytelling allows Chaucer to satirize, criticize, and comment on medieval society while showcasing a variety of genres and tones—romance, fabliau, sermon, beast fable, and more.

4. How does *Piers Plowman* reflect social concerns?

Piers Plowman, written by William Langland, is a powerful allegorical poem that vividly portrays the social, moral, and spiritual crises of 14th-century England. Set in a series of dream visions, the poem critiques the corruption of the Church, the hypocrisy of clergy, and the moral decay of society. It expresses concern over greed, pride, falsehood, and injustice, especially among those in power. Through the character of Piers, a humble plowman who represents honest Christian labor, Langland emphasizes the virtue of hard work and spiritual integrity. The poem supports the idea that salvation is accessible through good deeds and sincere faith, not merely through religious rituals. It was a voice of the common people and reflected growing popular unrest, making it an important document of early English social protest.

5. What themes are explored in Christopher Marlowe's plays?

Christopher Marlowe's plays explore grand and often controversial themes such as ambition, power, fate, knowledge, and human fallibility. In *Doctor Faustus*, the theme of intellectual pride and the desire for forbidden knowledge is central, as Faustus trades his soul for magical powers. *Tamburlaine* focuses on limitless ambition and the thirst for conquest, portraying a ruthless rise to power. Marlowe's characters are typically larger-than-life figures who challenge divine or moral boundaries, often facing tragic consequences. He also delves into religious skepticism, political intrigue, and human identity, making his plays more psychologically and philosophically complex than earlier dramas.

6. How did Elizabethan theatre differ from medieval drama?

Elizabethan theatre marked a significant departure from medieval drama in terms of themes, structure, and performance style. Medieval drama, rooted in the Church, focused on religious instruction and consisted of mystery, miracle, and morality plays. In contrast, Elizabethan drama became secular and human-centered, influenced by the Renaissance and classical models. The use of blank verse, complex characters, and multi-layered plots replaced the simple allegorical narratives of medieval plays. Theatres like the Globe emerged, offering professional performances, permanent stages, and audience interaction. Playwrights such as Shakespeare and Marlowe introduced individualism, realism, and emotional depth, establishing drama as a form of literary art rather than religious education.

7.What are the key elements of a Shakespearean comedy?

Shakespearean comedies are characterized by light-hearted tone, mistaken identities, clever wordplay, and complex romantic plots that usually end in marriage or reconciliation. These plays often include themes of love, forgiveness, social harmony, and transformation. The use of disguises and deception propels the plot, creating humorous confusion and eventual resolution. Comic characters, such as clowns or fools, offer wit and wisdom, acting as social commentators. Examples include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*. A significant feature is the restoration of order, often after a period of chaos, symbolizing the moral and social ideals of Elizabethan society.

8.Discuss the features of Ben Jonson's comedies.

Ben Jonson's comedies are best known for their sharp satirical edge, realistic characters, and adherence to the classical unities of time, place, and action. His plays, such as *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, expose human vices like greed, hypocrisy, vanity, and lust. Jonson developed the "comedy of humours," where characters are dominated by a single personality trait or "humour" that leads to comic situations. His use of urban settings, especially London, allowed him to critique contemporary society. Jonson's language is precise, learned, and witty, and his plots

are tightly constructed with a focus on moral instruction through laughter. He viewed comedy as a tool for correcting social follies

.9. Discuss the historical background of the Milton Age.

The Milton Age (1620–1660), also called the Puritan Age, was marked by intense political and religious upheaval. It coincided with the English Civil War, the execution of Charles I, and the rise of Oliver Cromwell's Puritan government. Literature during this period reflected Puritan ideals—seriousness, morality, and focus on religious themes. Theatres were closed, and poetry became more personal and meditative. Writers like Milton, Marvell, and Bunyan expressed deep spiritual concerns.

10. Explain Milton's role as a prose writer.

Though best known for his poetry, Milton's prose works were politically and religiously charged. He wrote tracts defending divorce, education, and republicanism. His most famous prose work, *Areopagitica*, argued against licensing and censorship. As Latin Secretary under Cromwell, he wrote political treatises and Latin correspondence. His prose reveals a powerful intellect and deep commitment to liberty and morality

11. Write a note on the political and literary background of the Dryden Age.

The Dryden Age (1660–1700) coincides with the Restoration of Charles II. It was a time of political stability after the Civil War, but also of moral laxity and aristocratic excess. Literature reflected the courtly culture and was marked by wit, satire, and realism. Theatres reopened after being shut during the Puritan rule. Writers like Dryden flourished, and drama, prose, and poetry developed new forms. The period was also a transition toward neoclassicism, focusing on order, reason, and decorum.

12. Explain the characteristics of Restoration drama.

Restoration drama was known for its witty dialogues, sexual themes, and social satire. Comedy of manners became popular, showcasing the hypocrisy and frivolity

of the upper classes. Heroic tragedy emphasized honour and passion. Women were allowed to act on stage for the first time. Theatres like the Drury Lane became cultural hubs. Dryden and Congreve were leading dramatists.

Essay

1. Discuss the major themes in Old English poetry with examples.

Old English poetry explores a variety of profound and recurring themes that reflect the worldview and values of the Anglo-Saxon society. One of the central themes is heroism and loyalty, vividly portrayed in *Beowulf*, where the protagonist displays bravery and strength in battling Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. The theme of exile and isolation is prominent in poems like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, where the speakers lament their loneliness and reflect on the hardships of life. Another significant theme is fate (*wyrd*), which represents the belief that life is governed by an inescapable destiny—this is evident in *Beowulf*, where the hero accepts his eventual death as part of fate. The conflict between pagan and Christian values also appears frequently, especially in *The Dream of the Rood*, which presents Christ as both a spiritual savior and a heroic warrior. Themes of loss, transience, and the search for wisdom underline the elegiac tone of many poems, capturing the somber mood of a people conscious of life's fragility. These themes give Old English poetry its distinctive moral depth and emotional resonance.

2. Discuss Chaucer's Contribution to the Development of English Language and Poetry

Geoffrey Chaucer, often called the "Father of English Poetry," played a foundational role in the development of English literature. Living during a time when Latin and French dominated literary and official discourse, Chaucer's decision to write in

Middle English was revolutionary. He not only elevated the status of the English language but also shaped its poetic tradition, leaving an enduring legacy that influenced writers for centuries.

Chaucer's most notable linguistic contribution was his use of the East Midland dialect, which eventually evolved into Standard English. Prior to his work, English was considered a "low" or rustic language unfit for serious literature. By composing his major works—The Canterbury Tales, Troilus and Criseyde, The Book of the Duchess, and others—in English, Chaucer proved that the vernacular could be both expressive and sophisticated. His language showed remarkable flexibility, blending Anglo-Saxon words with French and Latin influences, thereby enriching the vocabulary and stylistic possibilities of English.

In terms of poetic technique, Chaucer introduced and popularized several important forms. He was among the first English poets to use iambic pentameter, which later became the staple meter of English verse. His mastery of rhymed couplets, especially in The Canterbury Tales, laid the groundwork for the heroic couplet used by later poets like Alexander Pope. Chaucer also experimented with other forms, such as the rhyme royal in Troilus and Criseyde, which he helped introduce into English poetry.

Moreover, Chaucer's poetry reflects a wide range of genres, tones, and themes, showing his deep understanding of both classical and contemporary traditions. The Canterbury Tales, for example, includes romances, fabliaux, saints' lives, and moral allegories, all delivered through distinct and believable characters. This realistic portrayal of human nature, combined with satirical and moral insight, enriched English poetic narrative and inspired a more individualized and psychological approach to character development.

Finally, Chaucer's innovative narrative style, especially his use of the frame narrative, allowed for structural variety and thematic depth. He not only entertained but also criticized societal norms, such as the corruption in the Church, the roles of

women, and class hypocrisy, thereby establishing literature as a means of moral and social reflection.

In conclusion, Chaucer's contributions to the development of the English language and poetry are immeasurable. He legitimized English as a literary language, introduced new forms and meters, and expanded the thematic and stylistic scope of English poetry. His works mark the beginning of national literature and remain a cornerstone of the English literary tradition.

3. Discuss the Contribution of the University Wits to English Drama

The University Wits were a group of well-educated, university-trained dramatists active in the late 16th century who laid the foundation for Elizabethan drama, paving the way for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The main figures included Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Lodge, George Peele, and Thomas Kyd. These writers were associated with either Oxford or Cambridge and shared a common goal: to elevate English drama from the simplistic moral plays of the Middle Ages to a more artistic, emotionally rich, and structurally complex form of entertainment.

Their most significant contribution was the introduction of classical elements to English drama. Drawing on Greek and Roman models, they emphasized well-structured plots, tragic themes, and heroic characters. They also helped to popularize blank verse, especially Christopher Marlowe, whose powerful use of iambic pentameter in Doctor Faustus and Tamburlaine gave English drama a new poetic dimension.

The University Wits also expanded the range of subject matter in drama. While medieval drama had focused on religious or allegorical themes, these writers explored ambition, power, revenge, and individual identity. For example, Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy introduced the revenge tragedy motif that would later influence Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Another major contribution was their development of the tragic hero—a larger-than-life character driven by passion or fatal flaws. This is seen in Marlowe's characters like Faustus and Tamburlaine, who represent human striving and downfall.

4. Analyze the Themes and Structure of Shakespearean Tragedy

Shakespearean tragedy is a distinct and powerful genre that combines classical elements with deep psychological insight, resulting in plays that are emotionally intense and thematically profound. The basic structure of a Shakespearean tragedy follows the traditional pattern of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. However, what distinguishes Shakespeare's tragedies is the rich exploration of human character, inner conflict, and moral complexity.

One of the central themes in Shakespearean tragedy is the concept of the tragic flaw or hamartia—a personal weakness or error in judgment that leads to the protagonist's downfall. In Macbeth, it is unchecked ambition; in Hamlet, indecision and overthinking; in Othello, jealousy; and in King Lear, pride and blindness. These flaws are not simply moral failings, but deeply human characteristics that make the tragedies universally relatable.

Another recurring theme is fate versus free will. Shakespeare often blurs the line between destiny and personal choice, leaving the audience to ponder whether the tragic end was avoidable. The presence of supernatural elements, such as the witches in Macbeth or the ghost in Hamlet, further complicates this tension. Conflict is another vital theme—both external (political or social) and internal (psychological or moral). Shakespeare's heroes are often caught between opposing forces, leading to intense emotional struggles. The resulting tragic action typically escalates into chaos, suffering, and death, not just for the protagonist but also for those around them, emphasizing the far-reaching impact of personal flaws.

Structurally, Shakespeare's tragedies often include subplots that mirror or contrast with the main action, enhancing thematic complexity. The use of soliloquies provides deep access to a character's thoughts and emotions, offering the audience a window into internal conflict. His language, rich in metaphor and imagery, elevates the emotional intensity of the tragic narrative.

In conclusion, Shakespearean tragedy is not merely about downfall and death; it is a profound exploration of the human condition, where personal flaws, ethical dilemmas, and existential questions converge. The structure supports the emotional and thematic depth, making these works enduring masterpieces of world literature.

5. Examine the major literary features of the Milton Age with reference to its historical context.

The Milton Age, also referred to as the Puritan Age (1620–1660), was shaped by a complex interplay of political, religious, and literary forces. The age was dominated by the English Civil War, the fall of monarchy, and the rise of the Puritan-led Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. This turbulent background greatly influenced the literature of the time.

The dominant spirit of the age was moral seriousness and religious devotion. The Puritan movement disapproved of theatrical and light-hearted literature, leading to the closure of theatres in 1642. As a result, drama declined, and poetry and prose took center stage, focusing on moral, philosophical, and political themes.

John Milton emerged as the towering figure of the age. His *Paradise Lost* represents the pinnacle of English epic poetry. Written in blank verse and rich with classical allusions, the poem blends the traditions of Homer and Virgil with Biblical narrative. It reflects the Puritan worldview while also engaging with universal human concerns like free will, obedience, and redemption.

Other writers like Andrew Marvell and Robert Herrick also contributed significantly. Marvell's metaphysical poetry and political verse reflect both the personal and public conflicts of the time. Prose flourished in the form of sermons, tracts, and philosophical treatises. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written slightly after this period, was influenced by Puritan ideals.

The Milton Age stands out for its deep seriousness, intellectual vigor, and moral vision. It marked a turning point in English literature, moving away from the ornate styles of the Renaissance.

6. Evaluate the major trends and literary characteristics of the Dryden Age.

The Dryden Age or Restoration Age (1660–1700) is named after John Dryden, whose works dominate the literary scene. It began with the restoration of Charles II and saw a revival of arts, theatre, and literature. The age is marked by a shift from religious and idealistic themes of the Puritan period to secular, worldly, and often satirical content.

The chief literary trends of the period include the rise of neoclassicism, satire, and the development of prose and criticism. Writers admired classical models and aimed for clarity, order, and balance in expression. Poetry became more formal and structured, especially with the use of heroic couplets. Satire emerged as a powerful literary weapon, with Dryden using it to critique politics, society, and rival writers.

Drama flourished after theatres reopened. Restoration comedy, especially the Comedy of Manners, portrayed the romantic entanglements and moral looseness of the upper classes. William Congreve, George Etherege, and Wycherley were major dramatists. Heroic tragedy, on the other hand, focused on lofty themes and characters driven by honour and love.

Prose also matured during this period. There was a growing interest in essays, biographies, history, and criticism. Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* laid the groundwork for systematic literary criticism in English. The prose style became more conversational and less ornamental.

Overall, the Dryden Age marked a literary rebirth, focusing on intellect, wit, and realism. It served as a bridge between the Renaissance and the Augustan Age, setting standards of taste and form that would dominate 18th-century literature.

issuance to a more austere, introspective, and spiritually aware form of writing.