



## THE REFLECTION OF ANGLO-SAXON VALUES IN EARLY ENGLISH POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

*The article explores the reflection of Anglo-Saxon moral and cultural values in early English poetry, focusing on the analysis of Beowulf, The Seafarer, and The Wanderer. The study emphasizes the central role of heroism, loyalty, and fate (wyrd) in shaping the ethical and philosophical worldview of the Anglo-Saxon people. Through these poems, the author examines how traditional pagan ideals of courage and honor were gradually transformed under the influence of Christianity, creating a unique synthesis of heroic and spiritual values. The research demonstrates that early English poetry not only served as a means of artistic expression but also functioned as a cultural record preserving the moral foundations of Anglo-Saxon society.*

The Anglo-Saxon period, which lasted approximately from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, marked a crucial stage in the formation of English national identity, language, and literature. During this time, poetry was more than a form of artistic expression; it was a social institution that preserved historical memory, moral codes, and collective ideals. Anglo-Saxon poetry, characterized by its alliterative verse, oral tradition, and moral depth, reflects the essential worldview of its creators - a society built upon warfare, loyalty, and faith.

This article aims to examine how early English poetry, particularly *Beowulf*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wanderer*, embodies and transmits the central Anglo-Saxon values of heroism, loyalty, and fate. These works not only reveal the ethical and philosophical foundations of Anglo-Saxon culture but also demonstrate the transformation of these values under the influence of Christian thought.

The concept of **heroism** occupies a central position in Anglo-Saxon literature. The heroic code demanded absolute courage, personal honor, and the pursuit of glory (*lof*) as the highest human aspiration. A true warrior was expected to confront death without fear, defending his people and his reputation. In *Beowulf*, the protagonist's bravery and self-sacrifice illustrate the ideal of the perfect hero. His battles against Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon symbolize not only physical struggles but also moral tests of endurance and loyalty.

Beowulf's choice to fight the dragon despite his old age demonstrates a crucial cultural principle: a hero must fulfill his duty even when success is impossible. As the text suggests, "Fate often spares the undoomed man if his courage holds". This statement embodies the Anglo-Saxon belief that moral strength and bravery could resist fate, at least temporarily.

Heroism was, therefore, not only a physical attribute but a moral ideal reflecting the highest virtues of leadership, honor, and selflessness.

Moreover, the heroic ethos extended beyond individual valor. The society idealized the warrior who served his community and leader with unwavering devotion. Fame and legacy were considered the only ways to achieve immortality in a transient world. This explains why the Anglo-Saxon poet glorifies those who act bravely even in the face of death: through poetic remembrance, their names live forever. In this sense, early English poetry became both a moral guide and a monument to collective memory.

Equally important in Anglo-Saxon thought is the value of **loyalty** (*treow*) and **kinship** (*comitatus*). The relationship between a lord and his retainers formed the cornerstone of social and political life. In this bond, the lord provided protection and wealth, while the warriors pledged absolute fidelity and service. This mutual loyalty ensured social cohesion and mutual respect. Poems such as *The Wanderer* poignantly express the emotional and moral consequences of breaking this sacred bond. The speaker's lament over the loss of his lord and companions reveals the depth of loyalty in Anglo-Saxon culture: the loss of kinship equals the loss of purpose and identity. The line "Often the solitary one finds grace for himself, the mercy of the Lord, although he, sorrowful, must for a long time move by hand along the waterways, the ice-cold sea" (*The Wanderer*, lines 1-4) reflects both exile and the search for spiritual refuge. Exile from one's community was not only physical isolation but also moral and existential suffering.

In *Beowulf*, loyalty is likewise portrayed as the foundation of ethical behavior. The hero's followers stand by him in many battles, but when he fights the dragon, only Wiglaf remains faithful. This contrast emphasizes the deterioration of the *comitatus* ideal in the later Anglo-Saxon world, serving as a moral warning about the consequences of betrayal and cowardice. Loyalty, therefore, was not merely social duty but a sacred principle that bound individuals to their community and ensured moral order.

Another defining feature of Anglo-Saxon poetry is its reflection on **fate** (*wyrd*) and **religion**. In pre-Christian belief, *wyrd* represented an inevitable force that governed the destiny of all beings. However, with the Christianization of England, this fatalistic worldview gradually merged with ideas of divine providence and salvation. The coexistence of these two systems of belief produced a unique spiritual duality visible in much of early English poetry.

In *The Seafarer*, this synthesis is especially evident. The speaker describes the harshness of life at sea - the cold, isolation, and danger - as both a test of endurance and a metaphor for the spiritual journey of the soul. The poet acknowledges the power of *wyrd*, yet he ultimately finds comfort in faith, declaring that "A man must humble his heart, not think too highly of himself, for the Lord alone knows the fate of each." This passage marks a significant shift from heroic pride to Christian humility, demonstrating the evolving moral consciousness of Anglo-Saxon society.

Similarly, in *The Wanderer*, the interplay between fate and faith highlights the transition from despair to spiritual reflection. The speaker's meditation on the ruins of the past transforms into a moral lesson about the transience of earthly glory and the permanence of divine mercy. Thus, Anglo-Saxon poetry not only preserves the pagan admiration for courage and endurance but also introduces the Christian ideals of humility, repentance, and hope. This merging of two moral systems - the pagan and the Christian - created a uniquely rich ethical landscape. It allowed poets to explore the tension between human courage and divine will, between worldly fame and eternal salvation. The resulting poetry is not simply a record of values but a profound philosophical reflection on the human condition.

### Conclusion

Early English poetry stands as a vivid mirror of Anglo-Saxon values and beliefs. Through the themes of heroism, loyalty, and fate, works such as *Beowulf*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wanderer* capture the moral essence of a civilization in transition. These poems reveal a society that

revered bravery and loyalty yet increasingly sought spiritual meaning and divine guidance. The fusion of pagan and Christian ideals in Anglo-Saxon poetry illustrates the adaptability and depth of early English thought. The heroes of these poems are not merely warriors but moral exemplars whose struggles symbolize the eternal human conflict between duty and destiny, pride and faith, life and death. In this sense, early English poetry serves as both a literary monument and a moral document - preserving the ethos of an age that laid the foundations of English cultural identity and literary tradition.

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