



Literature During the Medieval Period



Languages

- Latin was the language of the Roman Catholic Church, which dominated Europe
- The Church was the only source of education
- Thus, Latin was a common language for Medieval writings. [*The commoners couldn't read anyway – they'd have heard the stories passed down orally.*]

Writings

Catholic clerics were the intellectual center of society in the Middle Ages, and it is their literature that was produced in the greatest quantity.



Characteristics of Medieval Literature

- Romance

- A narrative in prose or verse that tells of the high adventures and heroic exploits of chivalric heroes

- Tells of exploits of knights
- often a supernatural element involved

- Christian Message

- concern with salvation and the world to come
- no interest in social change, only spiritual change

- This was true until the late 14th century
- Geoffrey Chaucer and Dante Alighieri signal new thinking, try up-ending social order

Characteristics of Medieval Literature

- Heroism

- from both Germanic and Christian traditions, sometimes mingled

- *Beowulf*

- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

- *Song of Roland*

- Presentations of Idealized Behavior

- literature as moral lesson

- loyalty to king

- chivalry

Characteristics of Medieval Literature – Use of Allegory

- An **allegory** is a figurative mode of representation conveying a meaning other than the literal.
- Much of medieval literature relied on allegory to convey the morals the author had in mind while writing--representations of abstract qualities, events, and institutions are thick in much of the literature of this time.

Medieval Romances



- Often have unprovoked and violent fighting!
- Are set in a mystical place and time (the Dark Ages)
- Present supernatural elements, and magical powers from the pagan world
- Have a hero who is on a noble adventure or quest
- Have a loose, episode-like structure
- Include elements of courtly love
- Embody ideals of chivalry
- Time frame of a year and a day

- *Chivalry* is from the French word, *chevalier*, meaning horseman, or knight. *
- The Code of Chivalry influenced the formation of religious military orders during the period of the Crusades. The now famous Knights Templar and the Hospitalers are among the most noted knights of this period.
- During the later middle ages, chivalry had become largely as system of manners for the knights and a source of entertainment during tournaments – which themselves gradually became less threatening to the participants than live battle.”

The chivalric code combined Christian virtues with military virtues:

- Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice
- Faith, Hope, Charity
- Valor and strength in battle
- Loyalty to God and King
- Courtesy towards enemies
- Generosity towards the sick, women, widows and the oppressed
- Courtly Love*

The Ideal of Courtly Love

- This relationship was modeled on the feudal relationship between a knight and his liege lord.
- The knight serves his courtly lady with the same obedience and loyalty which he owes to his liege lord.
- She is in complete control; he owes her obedience and submission



The knight's love for the lady *inspires him to do great deeds*, in order to be worthy of her love or to win her favor.





- “Courtly love” was *not* between husband and wife because it was an idealized sort of relationship that could not exist within the context of “real life” medieval marriages.
- In the middle ages, marriages amongst the nobility were typically based on practical and dynastic concerns rather than on love.



- “Courtly love” provided a model of behavior for a class of unmarried young men who might otherwise have threatened social stability.
- Knights were typically younger brothers without land of their own (hence unable to support a wife).
- They became members of the household of the feudal lords whom they served.

**The literary model of courtly love
may have been invented to
provide young men with a model
for appropriate behavior.**

**It taught bored young knights to
control their baser desires and to
channel their energy into socially
useful behavior (*love service
rather than wandering around
the countryside, stealing or
raping women*).**

The Quest

- In addition to the theme of Courtly Love, the Quest was highly important to medieval romance:
- ✓ the code of conduct observed by a knight errant who is wandering in search of deeds of chivalry. This knight is bound by a code of behavior - a set of conventional principles and expectations



THE QUEST

- A **quest** is a hero's journey towards a goal. The objects of quests require great exertion on the part of the hero, and the overcoming of many obstacles (think Hero's Journey archetype!).
- The hero's must obtain something, or someone, by the quest and with this object return home.

THE QUEST

- Usually, an inner and outer problem for the character is set.
- The hero is introduced; audience identifies with them
- The hero lacks something, has a tragic flaw, or a deep wound
- The call often produces disorientation and discomfort for the hero
- The call is often in the form of a dire warning

THE QUEST

- Excuses are used to avoid the call
- This hesitation illustrates the formidability of the challenge ahead
- Resistance creates change and strength, allowing the hero to grow
- A physical or metaphorical crossing is made
- The crossing is an irrevocable leap of faith, from which there's no turning back

THE QUEST

- The hero faces his greatest fear
- The hero “dies,” so he can be reborn
- The hero gains new perception
- This new perception may create a moment of clarity
- The moment may be of great self-realization for the hero
- It may also be an epiphany for the hero’s companions



Ballads

The **ballad** is a poem that is typically arranged in quatrains with the rhyme scheme ABAB. Ballads are usually narrative, which **means** they tell a story. Ballads began as folk songs and continue to be used today in modern music.



Mystery plays were stories taken from the Bible. Each play had four or five different scenes or acts. The priests and monks were the actors. Each scene or act was performed at a different place in town and the people moved from one stage to the next to watch the play. The play usually ended outside the church so that the people would go to church and hear a sermon after watching the play.

The Miracle play was about the life or actions of a saint, usually about the actions that made that person a saint. One popular Miracle play was about Saint George and the dragon.

Morality plays were designed to teach people a lesson in how to live their life according to the rules of the church. Sometimes these plays had elaborate sets, sometimes no sets at all. It didn't seem to matter. The people attended these plays. They didn't have to, but it was a break from their normal daily lives.