CHAPTER TWO

OLD ENGLISH

(450- D 1150)

It is possible to recognize three main periods within the development of English language. These are Old English, Middle English and Modern English. Within each period certain broad characteristics and special developments will be discussed. Three chapters will be allotted to these three periods subsequently.

This Old English period is sometimes described as the period of full inflections. During most of this period, the endings of the nouns, the adjective and the verb are preserved.

Four major dialects can be distinguished in Old English times:

1. Northumbrian
2. Mercian — Dialects of the Angles
3. West Saxon — Dialect of West Saxon
4. Kentish — Dialect of the Jutes

The history of the country caused West Saxon (King Alfred's) to become by the tenth century the accepted language and attained something of the position of a literary standard. The west Saxon abundant material has become the basis of Old English grammars.

At the beginning of the period, literature was oral, composed by professional poets who traveled about the country and sang their story poems about famous people and their deeds.

Later, a writing system was developed for Anglo-Saxon, the major language of England. Nearly all the Old English literature is preserved in manuscripts.

1.1 The absence of words derived from Latin and French

Another characteristic of Old English compared to Modern English is the absence of words derived from Latin and French which form a large part of the words commonly used today.

Old English is purely Germanic. In fact, most of the vocabulary of Old English has disappeared. But the fact remains that the basic elements of Old English are still in use. They exist and are used frequently in any English sentence of today. These basic elements include pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs and the like.

The English pronouns of today *I*, *me,we,us,be*, *his* and *him* have come to us unchanged in their spelling. (for *I*, the scribes frequently used *y*). Others such as *it, her,* and *you* (ye) come from the Old English words *it*, *her,* and *you* (*ge).*

In the same way *who* comes from Old English h*wa* and *why* from OE h*wy*. While the conjunction *and* remains unaltered.

A number of prepositions in Modern English have come down from OE without change. Good examples of these are *for, under, in, on* and *to* whereas some prepositions have been changed by speakers and writers slightly such as *ofer* (over) *uppon*, *aefter* (after) and *fram* (from).

In addition some of the names for numbers of today are closely similar to OE forms as shown in the following table:

Old English	**Modern English**
An	One
Twegan	Two
Pry	Three

Feower	Four
Fif	Five
Syx	Six
Seofen	Seven
Eahta	Eight
Nigon	Nine
Tyn	Ten
Fiftig	Fifty
Hundred	Hundred (unchanged)

It is noticeable that words that express fundamental concepts in current English have come from Old English:

Old English	**Modern English**
Mann	Man
Wif	Wife
Cild	Child
Hus	House
Mete	Meat
Srang	Strong
Etan	Eat
Drincan	Drink
Slaepn	Sleep
Benc	bench
Fiftiq	Fifty

1.2 Grammar in Old English

Old English is a synthetic language in which the relation of words in a sentence is shown through inflections. The inflection of Old English noun indicates distinction of number (singular, plural, dual) and case. The case system is simpler than that of Latin and other European languages.

The nouns of Old English were declined as Latin or German nouns are declined although their endings, of course, are not the same as Latin or German endings. In OE, the forms were more numerous e.g. *stan, stanes, stane,* were used as singular forms and *stanas, stana, and stanum as* plural. On the other hand, there are only three forms of the same word in Modern English: *stone*, *stones, stone's* and *stones*'. The forms in modern English cover the inflection the noun may have in OE.

As for verbs, Old English distinguished only two simple tenses by inflection, a present and a past. It had no inflected forms in the passive as in Latin or Greek. It recognized the *indicative*, *subjunctive and imperative* moods.

A feature of the Germanic languages was the division of the verb into two great classes: the weak and strong verbs (regular and irregular verbs). The strong verbs are as *sing, sang, sung* which represent the basic Indo-European type; they are *called* so because they have the power of indicating change of tense by a modification of their root vowel. The weak verbs are such as *walk walked, walked*. In Old English strong verbs (irregular verbs) are less numerous than weak verbs. Generally speaking these verbs had different vowels in the present tense, the past tense and the present participle. In Old English, the vowel of the past tense often differs in the singular and plural. To be more accurate, the first and third person singular

have one vowel while the second person singular and all persons of the plural have another. Examples of Old strong verbs (irregular verbs) with the personal endings are shown in the table below:

The infinitive	First & Third Person	Plural	Past Participle
1- drifan (drive) 2 ceosan (Choose	draf ceas	drifon curon	drifen coren
3- helpan (help)	healp	hulpon	Holpen
4- beran (bear)	bær	bæron	Boren
5-Sprecan (Speak)	spræc	spræcon	Sprecen
6- faran fare go	for	foron	Faren
7- Feallan (fall)	fĕoll	fĕollon	Feallen

Source : A History of English language (1972) by Baugh and Cable.

1.3 Self-explaining compounds

This type of compounds, although found in most languages, is particularly common in Old English. These are compounds of two or more native words whose meaning in combination is either self-evident or is clear by association or usage. So in Old English we have *earhring* (earring), dægred (down= (day-red), fotadl (gout,- footdisease) etc.

1.4 Prefixes and suffixes

This part shows the flexibility of the Old English vocabulary which comes from the general use made of prefixes and suffixes to form new words from old ones or to modify or extend the root idea. Several words are formed with the suffixes (-ig) *full, leas, - nes* (ness) and *ung, scipe, (Ship)*.

Other suffixes frequently employed include the adjective suffixes *sum,* the noun suffixes *dom* (cyningdom), had (cildhad – childhood).

Similarly, the use of prefixes was a fertile resource in word-building. There are about a dozen prefixes that occurred with great frequency : *a-,be-for ,fore-,ge-,mis-,of-,on-,ofer,on-, to-, un-, under-* and *wip* (with).

1.5 Old English Literature

The language of a past time is known by the quality of its literature. It is in the literature that a language displays its full power and its ability to convey vivid forms of thoughts and emotions of a nation. Some of the literature was – without doubt brought to England by Germanic invaders from their European homes and preserved for some time in the oral tradition. And it owes preservation to the introduction of Christianity into the Island at the end of the sixth century. Two streams were mixed in Old English literature, the pagan and the Christian and they are never quite distinct.

The greatest outstanding work of Old English literature is *Beowulf.* It is a poem of 3.000 lines belonging to the type known as *folk epic.* It is a narrative of heroic adventure relating how a young warrior, *Beowulf,* fought the monster Grendel, which was ravaging the land of king Hrothgar. It is the most vivid record we have of life in that heroic age. More than half of Anglo-Saxon poetry is concerned with Christianity. Translations of the old and new Testaments, legends of saints, devotional' and didactic pieces constitute the bulk of the verse. It is worth mentioning that English possessed a considerable body of prose literature as well. So large and varied a body of literature in verse and prose reflects the power and beauty of Old English.

Questions on Chapter Two

1. Why is Old English Labelled as the period of full inflections?
2. List the major dialects in the Old English period.

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   b-

   c-
3. What was literature like during this period?
4. Basic elements of Old English are still in use. Give examples of these basic elements.
5. Outline the major characteristics of Old English.
6. Provide the up-to-date English words corresponding to the following ones in Old English.

1. fur	2. bæt	3. stan	4. ban
5. cene	6. hu	7. fif	8. feower
9. syx	10. eahta		