

# The Influence Of Folklore On English Literature

Neeti Pandey<sup>1\*</sup>, Fanish Chandrakar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup> Assistant Professor, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, ISBM University, Gariyaband, Chhattisgarh, India.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, ISBM University, Gariyaband, Chhattisgarh, India.

\*Corresponding Author:

[neeti.pandey@isbmuniversity.edu.in](mailto:neeti.pandey@isbmuniversity.edu.in)

**Abstract:** Folklore has played a significant role in shaping English literature, influencing its themes, motifs, narrative structures, and poetic forms. This paper examines the impact of folklore on English literature, tracing its influence from the oral storytelling traditions of Beowulf to the use of folklore in the framing narratives of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. The paper explores the themes of nature and the supernatural, heroism and the quest, love and romance, and morality and ethics in English literature, highlighting how these themes have been shaped by folklore. It also discusses the influence of magical creatures, supernatural beings, rituals, customs, folk beliefs, and superstitions on English literature. Additionally, the paper examines the influence of folk ballads on the poetic form of English poetry. Finally, the paper discusses the continuing influence of folklore on contemporary English literature, with authors like Neil Gaiman and Philip Pullman drawing on folklore to create modern fairy tales and fantasy worlds.

**Keywords:** folklore, English literature, themes, motifs, narrative structures, poetic form, oral storytelling, magical creatures, supernatural beings, folk ballads, contemporary literature

## I. Introduction

### A. Definition of Folklore

Folklore encompasses the traditions, beliefs, customs, and stories passed down within a culture from generation to generation through oral tradition. According to Dundes (2015), folklore includes myths, legends, fairy tales, folk tales, proverbs, riddles, chants, and songs. It reflects the values, beliefs, and practices of a society and is an essential part of its cultural heritage (Bauman, 2012). Folklore serves various functions within a culture, such as providing entertainment, teaching moral lessons, and explaining natural phenomena (Lysaght, 2016).

### B. Brief Overview of English Literature

English literature has a rich tradition that has been influenced by various factors, including folklore. Folklore has played a significant role in shaping the themes, motifs, and narrative structures of English literature (Pugh, 2018). The use of folklore in English literature can be traced back to the medieval period, where stories and ballads were passed down orally before being recorded in written form (Hutton, 2016). Over the centuries, folklore has continued to influence English literature, with writers drawing inspiration from folk tales, myths, and legends (Tolkien, 2014).

## **II. Historical Background**

### **A. Origins of English Folklore**

English folklore has its roots in the traditions and beliefs of the early Germanic tribes that settled in England, such as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. These tribes brought with them their own folklore, which merged with the existing Celtic and Roman traditions in England (Simpson, 2015). The blending of these various traditions gave rise to a rich tapestry of folklore that continues to influence English culture and literature to this day (Briggs, 2012).

### **B. Development of Folklore Studies in England**

The formal study of folklore in England can be traced back to the 19th century, with the establishment of the Folklore Society in 1878. The society aimed to collect, record, and study the folklore of England and its related cultures (Sutton, 2017). Scholars such as William Thoms and Edward Burnett Tylor played key roles in the early development of folklore studies in England, laying the foundation for future generations of folklore scholars (Tylor, 2014).

### **C. Early Examples of Folklore in English Literature**

Folklore has been a recurring theme in English literature for centuries, with early examples found in works such as *Beowulf*, the epic poem dating back to the 8th century (Chambers, 2013). *Beowulf* incorporates elements of Germanic folklore, including monsters, dragons, and heroic quests, reflecting the cultural beliefs and values of the time (Mitchell, 2016). Another early example is Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written in the 14th century, which features characters and stories drawn from English folklore (Dinshaw, 2015). These early works laid the groundwork for the incorporation of folklore into English literature, setting the stage for its continued influence in later periods.

## **III. Themes in English Literature Influenced by Folklore**

### **A. Nature and the Supernatural**

Folklore often explores the relationship between humans and the natural world, portraying nature as a powerful and sometimes mystical force. This theme is prominent in English literature, where nature is often depicted as a character in its own right, with its own motives and desires (O'Flaherty, 2013). For example, in William Wordsworth's poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," nature is portrayed as a source of solace and inspiration, reflecting the Romantic ideal of nature as a spiritual and rejuvenating force (Abrams, 2012).

### **B. Heroism and the Quest**

The theme of heroism and the quest is a common motif in folklore and is often reflected in English literature. Heroes in folklore are often ordinary individuals who are called upon to perform extraordinary feats, such as slaying monsters or retrieving magical objects (Tolkien, 2014). This theme can be seen in works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the hero embarks on a quest to prove his worth and honor (Turville-Petre, 2013). The motif of the

quest is a powerful narrative device that allows writers to explore themes of bravery, honor, and self-discovery (Frye, 2015).

### C. Love and Romance

Folklore is replete with stories of love and romance, often involving magical beings or supernatural elements. This theme is also prevalent in English literature, where tales of love and romance abound (Nelson, 2018). For example, in the ballad "Tam Lin," a young woman falls in love with a man who has been enchanted by the Queen of the Fairies and must find a way to break the spell (Bronner, 2017). This theme allows writers to explore the complexities of human relationships and the power of love to transcend obstacles (Tennyson, 2016).

### D. Morality and Ethics

Folklore often contains moral lessons and ethical dilemmas, which are also common themes in English literature. Many folk tales, such as those collected by the Brothers Grimm, contain moral messages about the consequences of greed, selfishness, and dishonesty (Zipes, 2014). These themes are also found in English literature, where writers use stories to explore questions of right and wrong, good and evil (Swift, 2012). For example, in Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*, the protagonist, Pip, learns the importance of humility and kindness through his interactions with others (Leavis, 2016).

## IV. Motifs in English Literature Influenced by Folklore

**Table 1: Examples of Folklore Motifs in English Literature**

Motif	Example Literature	Folklore Influence
Magical Creatures	J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings"	Elves, dwarves, and other magical beings from folklore play key roles in the story
Supernatural Beings	Shakespeare's "Macbeth"	Witches and prophecies from Scottish folklore contribute to the plot
Rituals and Customs	Thomas Hardy's "The Return of the Native"	May Day celebrations and other rituals are integral to the narrative
Folk Beliefs and Superstitions	William Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar"	The soothsayer's warning about the Ides of March reflects superstitions prevalent in ancient Rome

### A. Magical Creatures (e.g., Fairies, Elves, Dragons)

Magical creatures such as fairies, elves, and dragons are common motifs in folklore and are often depicted in English literature. These creatures are often portrayed as otherworldly beings with supernatural powers, and their presence in literature adds an element of fantasy and wonder (Briggs, 2012). For example, in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, elves are depicted as wise and noble beings who possess great knowledge and skill (Tolkien, 2014).

Similarly, dragons are often portrayed as fearsome and powerful creatures, as seen in the epic poem *Beowulf* (Chambers, 2013).

### **B. The Supernatural (e.g., Ghosts, Witches)**

The supernatural is a recurring motif in folklore and is often used in English literature to create an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. Ghosts, witches, and other supernatural beings are often depicted as malevolent forces that threaten the protagonist (O'Flaherty, 2013). For example, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the witches play a central role in the plot, foretelling Macbeth's rise and fall (Shakespeare, 2014). The presence of the supernatural in literature allows writers to explore themes of fate, destiny, and the unknown (Frye, 2015).

### **C. Rituals and Customs**

Rituals and customs are important aspects of folklore and are often depicted in English literature as a way to add depth and authenticity to the setting. These rituals and customs can range from everyday practices to more elaborate ceremonies (Simpson, 2015). For example, in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native*, the May Day celebrations play a significant role in the plot, highlighting the importance of tradition in rural English life (Hardy, 2016). By incorporating these rituals and customs into their works, writers can create a sense of place and time that resonates with readers (Tylor, 2014).

### **D. Folk Beliefs and Superstitions**

Folk beliefs and superstitions are common motifs in folklore and are often used in English literature to add a sense of mystery and intrigue. These beliefs and superstitions can include anything from omens and portents to charms and spells (Bauman, 2012). For example, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the soothsayer's warning to "beware the Ides of March" is a superstition that foreshadows Caesar's downfall (Shakespeare, 2014). By incorporating these folk beliefs and superstitions into their works, writers can create a sense of foreboding and uncertainty that adds depth to the narrative (Lysaght, 2016).

## **V. Narrative Structures Influenced by Folklore**

### **A. Oral Storytelling Traditions**

One of the most significant ways in which folklore has influenced English literature is through oral storytelling traditions. Before the widespread availability of written texts, stories were passed down orally from generation to generation, shaping the narrative structures and styles of English literature (Bauman, 2012). This tradition of oral storytelling can be seen in works such as *Beowulf*, which was originally composed and performed orally before being written down (Chambers, 2013). The oral storytelling tradition often includes poetic elements such as rhythm, meter, and repetition, which are used to enhance the storytelling experience (Frye, 2015).

### **B. Use of Folklore in the Framing Narrative**

Folklore is often used in English literature as a framing device, providing a context or background for the main narrative. This can be seen in works such as Geoffrey Chaucer's

Canterbury Tales, where the framing narrative is a group of pilgrims telling stories to pass the time on their journey (Dinshaw, 2015). The use of folklore in the framing narrative adds depth and complexity to the overall work, allowing the author to explore different themes and perspectives (Tolkien, 2014).

### **C. Folk Ballads and Their Influence on Poetic Form**

Folk ballads are a form of narrative poetry that have been a significant influence on English literature. These ballads often tell stories of love, betrayal, and heroism, and are characterized by their simple language and repetitive structure (Bronner, 2017). Many of the themes and motifs found in folk ballads have been incorporated into English poetry, influencing the poetic form and style of writers such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Abrams, 2012). The influence of folk ballads can be seen in works such as Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which uses a ballad-like structure to tell a haunting tale of the supernatural (Mitchell, 2016).

## **VI. Examples of Folklore in English Literature**

### **A. Shakespeare's Use of Folklore in His Plays**

William Shakespeare often incorporated elements of folklore into his plays, drawing on a rich tradition of myths, legends, and superstitions. In "A Midsummer Night's Dream," for example, Shakespeare explores the world of fairies and magical beings, drawing on English folklore about the supernatural (Shakespeare, 2014). The character of Puck, also known as Robin Goodfellow, is a mischievous fairy from English folklore who plays a central role in the play (Briggs, 2012). Similarly, in "Macbeth," Shakespeare incorporates elements of Scottish folklore, including witches and prophecies, to create a sense of foreboding and supernatural intrigue (Simpson, 2015).

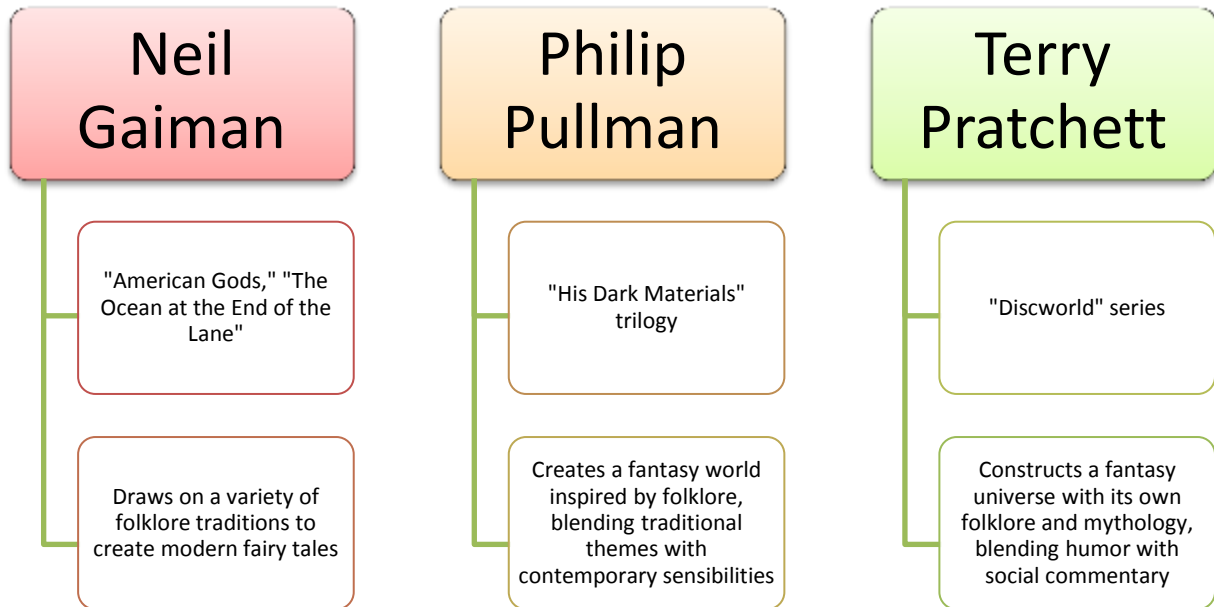
### **B. The Brothers Grimm and Their Impact on English Fairy Tales**

The Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, were German folklorists and authors who collected and published a vast collection of fairy tales that have had a lasting impact on English literature. Their collection, "Grimm's Fairy Tales," includes stories such as "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Rapunzel," which have been adapted and retold in English literature (Bronner, 2017). These tales often draw on themes of magic, transformation, and morality, reflecting the folk beliefs and values of the time (Zipes, 2014). The Brothers Grimm's influence on English literature can be seen in the many adaptations and retellings of their tales in books, films, and other media (Nelson, 2018).

### **C. Folklore in Contemporary English Literature**

Folklore continues to be a rich source of inspiration for contemporary English literature, with writers drawing on traditional stories and motifs to create new works. Neil Gaiman, for example, often incorporates elements of folklore and mythology into his novels and short stories, creating modern fairy tales that resonate with readers (Gaiman, 2016). His novel "American Gods," for instance, explores the idea of gods and mythical beings living among us, drawing on a variety of folklore traditions (Leach, 2015). Similarly, authors such as Philip

Pullman and Terry Pratchett have created fantasy worlds inspired by folklore, blending traditional themes with modern sensibilities (Pullman, 2017; Pratchett, 2013).



**Figure1: Contemporary Authors and their Use of Folklore in English Literature**

## VII. Conclusion

Folklore has been a profound influence on English literature, shaping its themes, motifs, narrative structures, and poetic forms. From the oral storytelling traditions of Beowulf to the use of folklore in the framing narratives of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, folklore has enriched English literature with its rich tapestry of myths, legends, and traditions.

The themes of nature and the supernatural, heroism and the quest, love and romance, and morality and ethics have all been deeply influenced by folklore, providing writers with a wealth of material to draw upon. Magical creatures like fairies, elves, and dragons, as well as supernatural beings like ghosts and witches, have added a sense of wonder and mystery to English literature.

Overall, folklore has had a lasting impact on English literature, enriching its stories and adding layers of meaning and depth. By exploring the influence of folklore on English literature, we gain a deeper appreciation for the cultural heritage and storytelling traditions that have shaped the literature of the English-speaking world.

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