

Ms. Deepika Tiwari

Assistant Professor

Patna Women's College

Email ID – dtdeepikatiwari@gmail.com

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Paper Name – Introduction: 14th to 17th Century Literature

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Elizabethan Age (1558 – 1625)

1.0 Introduction:

Elizabethan age is named after the reign of the last Tudor Monarch of England, Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled from 1558 – 1603. Her forty-five years of reign is generally considered to be one of the most glorious and golden periods in English history. This was a time of rapid development in English commerce, maritime power and it also witnessed a rise in nationalist feeling (the defeat in Spanish Armada in 1588). The queen herself was a great patron of arts and her actions, image and court atmosphere led to a flourishing of arts and literature in this period.

2.0 Historical Background of the Age:

Five years before Elizabeth's accession, her half sister Mary had made a determined attempt to re-establish Catholicism in her realm and to participate in the European Catholic reformation. When Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558 there were violent clashes between Protestants and Catholics. Though Queen Elizabeth herself was a protestant, she initially demonstrated a degree of tolerance towards the Catholics. However, as Catholics started plotting to replace her with a catholic monarch, this degree of tolerance decreased.

In 1559, Parliament passed the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity, which were together known as The Religious Settlement of 1559. The Act of Supremacy led to the complete control the church of England into the hands of Queen Elizabeth. Under the monarch of her father Henry VIII and brother Edward VI monarch was the 'head of the church in England'. However, under the rule of Queen Elizabeth, she was given the title and position of the Supreme Governor of the Church in England.

Elizabethan Period also led to the acceptance of Protestant Reformation. This movement was headed by Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Looking into the Scientific Background of the Age, we witness great advances in the realm of Science and Technology. Scientific discoveries were made in the fields of medicine, astronomy, cartography and Land Surveying. England also made significant advances in realm of Navigation and Exploration.

3.0 Literature of the Elizabethan Age:

Elizabethan England saw a remarkable flourishing of arts and literature. Renaissance, Humanism, Protestant Zeal, Geographical and Scientific discovery all contributed to this upsurge of creative power. Drama was the dominant genre in Elizabethan Age. William Shakespeare was the most significant playwright of the age. Shakespeare's oeuvre includes a wide variety of comedies, tragedies, tragi-comedies and sonnets. Owing to the influence he wielded, the age is also sometimes named after him as 'The Age of Shakespeare'.

This age saw the appearance of the first English comedy *Ralph Roister Doister* by Nicholas Udall (1551-53) and the first English blank verse tragedy *Gorboduc* or *The Tragedy of Forrex* and *Porrex*.

Elizabethan age also witnessed the establishment of 'The Theatre' in 1576, the earliest theatre ever built. Following it the other theatres were built 'The Rose', 'The swan', and most popular of all 'The Globe' was built in 1599.

3.1 Elizabethan Lyric:

Lyric poetry was the second most important literary genre in the Elizabethan period. These were relatively short poems about personal, romantic topics or poems set to the tune of a musical instrument. The Elizabethan lyric owes its first inspiration almost exclusively to the influence of Italian poetry.

However, with Spenser the Elizabethan lyric comes into its own and acquires a singular character. Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* is the only long Elizabethan lyric poem of very highest rank.

Elizabethan lyric varied in forms such as the sonnet, song, pastoral, ode, elegy and epithalamion.

Spenser's *Shepherd's Calender* and Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* marked the triumphant maturity of Elizabethan poetry.

3.2 Elizabethan Sonnets:

A sonnet is a lyric poem consisting of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, with an intricate rhyme scheme. Elizabethan sonnets were of two main types: **Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet** and **Shakespearean Sonnet**.

Petrarchan sonnet consists of an octave followed by a sestet. The most common rhyme scheme of this sonnet is abba abba cde cde or abba abba cdc cdc. The Petrarchan sonnet was brought to England by Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Unlike the Italian form, Shakespearean sonnet is considered as quintessentially English sonnet. It is made up of three quatrains and ends in rhymed couplet. The rhyme scheme of this sonnet is abab cdcd efef gg.

3.3 Major Poets of Elizabethan age:

- Edmund Spenser (1552 – 1599)
- Philip Sidney (1554 – 1586)
- Michael Drayton (1563 – 1631)

4.0 Elizabethan Drama:

Drama was the most popular genre during Elizabethan time. During this time Renaissance flowered right across Europe but had different emphasis in the different European Cultures – it was religion and philosophy in Germany. Art, architecture and sculpture in Italy. And

in England it was in theatre drama. By the time Elizabeth's reign ended there were over twenty theatres in London. William Shakespeare was the representative dramatist of this age.

4.1 Pre – Shakespearean Drama: University wits

University wits were a group of English dramatists, who wrote in the 16th century and were educated at the universities of Oxford or Cambridge. According to Edward Albert, the plays of university wits had certain common features – there was a fascination towards heroic themes, style and treatment was also heroic and the themes were tragic in nature.

The group includes:

- John Lyly (1554 – 1606)
- George Peele (1558 – 1596)
- Robert Greene (1558 – 1592)
- Thomas Lodge (1557 – 1625)
- Thomas Nashe (1567 – 1601)
- Thomas Kyd (1557 – 1594)
- Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593)

4.2 William Shakespeare:

English poet and playwright William Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford – upon – Avon. Hence, he is also called as The Bard of Avon. Not much is known of Shakespeare's education. It is generally assumed that he attended the local grammar school, the King's New School. At the age of sixteen Shakespeare married twenty - six year old Anne Hathaway. With whom he had three children. Shakespeare's literary career started around 1592. By this time he started earning a living as an actor and playwright in London. Two years later, he became a leading

member of Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company in London. After the crowning of King James I in 1603, the company changed its name to King's Men. Shakespeare produced most of his known work between 1589 and 1613. Most of his plays were written as 'quarto texts' on a sheet of paper folded four ways. A few of his plays were printed in his lifetime, though they appeared more voluminously after his death. His first collection of works was printed in 1623. Shakespeare retired to Stratford few years before his death. His last three plays were written in collaboration, probably with John Fletcher. Shakespeare died on 23rd April, 1616.

4.3 Shakespearean Comedy:

Shakespeare perfected the genre of Romantic comedy. The main theme of his comedy is love. However, lovers usually experience a set of obstacles before they get united in a harmonious union. The play frequently ends with a marriage or a celebration. All conflicts get resolved at the end. Shakespeare's romantic comedies are all set in an imaginative world far away from the dull and the dreary world of everybody life. Through the use of humor, Shakespeare deals with serious issues. For example in *As You Like It* he takes up the issue of power, court, politics and issue of cross-dressing. While in *Comedy of Errors* he takes up the issue of insanity. His major comedies are – *All's well that Ends Well*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer's Night dream* *Much ado About Nothing*, *As you Like It*, *The Tempest* etc.

4.4 Shakespearean Tragedy:

Tragedy is a serious play or drama typically dealing with the problems of a central character, leading to an unhappy or disastrous ending brought on. According to AC Bradley, a Shakespearean tragedy can be divided into three parts:

- i. Exposition
- ii. Conflict

iii. Catastrophe

In Shakespearean tragedies, the tragic hero is a person of high social estate, raised above the rest. He undergoes suffering as a result of his tragic flaw or error of judgement. For example Othello's Tragic flaw was sexual jealousy, Macbeth's tragic flaw was ambition, king Lear's tragic flaw was pride etc. The tragedy ends with the death of the hero. However, even though the hero dies, moral order is eventually restored at the end. His major tragedies are: *King Lear, Othello, Macbeth, hamlet* etc.

4.5 Shakespeare's History Plays:

Although there is no uniform consensus about what exactly constitutes a Shakespearean history plays, yet the term generally refers to the ten plays that cover English history from 12th to 16th centuries and each named after and focusing on a reigning monarch. Shakespeare's primary source for History plays was Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*.

According to John M Mercer Shakespeare's history plays usually have episodic plots 'unified primarily by their presentation of significant events from the reign of one monarch'. These dramas contained both the elements of comedy and tragedy or exhibit the traits of just one of these genres. Example – Richard II and III are tragedies and Henry IV is comedy.

His major History plays are – *King John, Richard II, Henry IV; part 2, Henry VI; part I, Henry VI; part III, Henry VIII, Edward III, Henry IV; part I, Henry V, Henry VI; part II, Richard III*.

5.0 Important Questions:

1. Discuss the historical background of Elizabethan age.
2. Write a note on the influence of Renaissance on Elizabethan drama.
3. Shakespeare is the representative writer of Elizabethan Age. Elucidate.
4. Write a note on University wits.