

# Elizabethan Poetry

## Introduction:

Elizabethan age is one of the most prominent and fertile age from the point of poetic output in English literature. It spans from around 1550 to 1623. It is so called because Queen Elizabeth I ruled during the period. Though her reign was between 1558 and 1603, the entire period up to 1623 is referred to as Elizabethan period. It is also called as Shakespearean age as William Shakespeare was the most prominent writer of the period (1564-1616). The Elizabethan age therefore also includes the Jacobean period which extends from 1603 to 1625 when King James I ruled England. It is the golden age of English poetry and is often called as “a veritable nest of singing birds”. It shows a great influence of Greek and Italian poetry. The stimulus for writing poetry was provided by the Renaissance or the revival of interest in the literature and mythology of ancient Greece and Rome and in the Greek culture and way of life. Numerous translations of this ancient classical literature nurtured the English literature of this period.

The impact of the ancient Greek and Roman literature on English is seen in i) the tradition of sonnet writing, ii) the popularity of the lyric reflecting the Elizabethan love of music and zest for life, iii) the pastoral tradition, iv) the ambition to write an epic in the style of either Homer or Virgil and v) in the vast output of dramatic poetry of high quality.

## Contribution of the Elizabethan Age to Poetry:

### 1. The Elizabethan sonnet and sonneteers:

Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey were greatly influenced by the Italian lyrical form Sonnet, perfected and popularized by Petrarch. They translated and composed sonnets in English. Their sonnets were published after their death in Tottle’s *Miscellany* in 1557. The English poets of the period were fascinated by the fourteen- line love poem about courtly love and they tried their hand at it. In fact they wrote series of sonnets, sometimes following the Petrarchan style and sometimes introducing certain variations according to their needs. Apart from Wyatt and Surrey, Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson are among the prominent sonneteers of the period.

Sir Philip Sidney: He composed a sonnet sequence consisting of about 100 sonnets entitled *Astrophel and Stella* published in 1591. They are addressed to Penelope, the wife of lord riche. Actually Sidney refused her hand and later felt love for her after she was married to Lord Rich. Thus it was an example of unattainable love that was destined to end in sorrow. The sonnets are influenced by Petrarchan sonnets and set the tone of artificiality reflected in other sonneteers of the period. It is written in the pastoral style and both the lover and the beloved are imagined to be shepherds. There is lot of sincerity in the passions expressed. Conversational tone and beautiful descriptions of natural beauty. The sequence was greatly popular in the Elizabethan period and it inspired a lot of poets to try their hand at writing sonnets.

Edmund Spenser: Sincerity is also the characteristic feature of Spenser’s sonnets. His *Amoretti*, a sequence of 88 sonnets is addressed to Elizabeth Boyle to whom he was betrothed and soon got married. He connected the three quatrains and the couplet with an interlinking

rhyme scheme. His sonnets are marked for their purity and serenity and is regarded as the most moral of the Elizabethan poets.

Michael Drayton: His sonnets are addressed to Idea, a fictitious beloved and share in the artificiality of treatment. The conversational tone and use of wit mark his sonnets. His main contribution lies in longer poems rather than in sonnets.

Samuel Daniel is another important sonneteer whose sonnet sequence is entitled *Delia*. Though it is marked with purity of language and correctness of versification, it is a result of following a popular tradition and not of any real passion. It clearly displays artificiality and lack of true passion.

William Shakespeare arrived on the scene almost towards the end of the sonnet tradition. Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets which were published in 1609. Shakespeare revolutionized the sonnet both, in matter and manner. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to a male friend Mr. W. H. and the remaining are addressed to a Dark Lady. The identity of both these persons are unknown till date. They are not addressed to any beloved. Courtly love is the theme of a sonnet but Shakespeare's sonnets have friendship, art, death youth and oldage, seasons, nature of true love as the themes of the sonnets. He perfected the Surrey- type of structure involving three quatrains and a couplet. Considering the paucity of rhyming words in English, Surrey had introduced seven pairs of rhyming words wherein the quatrains used alternate rhyming and this was followed by a final rhyming couplet. Shakespeare perfected the style and instead of the eight-six division of the Petrarchan sonnet with a Volta in the ninth line, Shakespeare chose to develop the theme in the three quatrains and the Volta in the form of a comment or change in thought came in the thirteenth line. With these changes the dying sonnet got new life and continued to charm poets in every successive age. Though Ben Jonson did not write a series of sonnets, his significant contribution is the introduction of the intellectual element in the sonnets reflected in "To Celia" and "Celia". This led to the development of the metaphysical poetry that emerged in the early part of the seventeenth century. In fact the metaphysical poets acknowledge this debt by calling themselves 'sons of Ben'.

## **2. Pastoral poetry:**

Pastoral poetry deals with the life of farmers and shepherds living a simple life in the close company of nature. It celebrates the simplicity, innocence, purity and freshness of such life as well natural beauty. Theocritus, the ancient Greek poet is said to have initiated pastoral poetry. He, along with Virgil is seen to have influenced English pastoral poetry. Sir Philip Sidney wrote *Arcadia* in the pastoral style. Edmund Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1579) is a well-known pastoral poem. It consists of twelve eclogues; one for every month wherein the poet, through the guise of shepherds, is seen talking and singing about his love for some mysterious Rosalind and also dwells upon many moral and religious questions of his time.

## **3. The Epic tradition:**

The influence of Greek and roman literature was not limited to lyrical poetry but was also seen on the attempts at writing epic poetry. A number of poets tried their hand at composing epic poems after the models of Homer and Virgil. While Chapman attempted translations of Homer, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton and Edmund Spenser gave the best long narrative poems of the time.

Samuel Daniel (1562-1619) was known for restraint, moderation and tranquility. His *The Civil Wars*, a long narrative poem in eight Cantos is about the bloody War of Roses and reflects Daniel's patriotism as well his fears of a similar war in the Elizabethan age.

Michael Drayton (1562- 1631) also wrote a long narrative poem entitled *The Barons' War*. But his fame rests on *Polyolbion* which is massive poem that poetizes the geography of England comprising of over thirty cantos. It displays the zeal of the poet and stray passages of rare beauty.

Edmund Spenser is the greatest name in the epic tradition of the Elizabethan period. The first attempt at composing a proper English epic is by Spenser. His *The Faerie Queene*, follows the Virgilian model of twelve books. It attempts to immortalize the adventures of the knights of the faerie queen. Prince Arthur, in quest of this queen meets these knights. The twelve knights in their adventurous journeys pursue twelve moral virtues epitomized in their lady love. It is modelled on the Italian romantic epics with great emphasis on chivalric materials. Unfortunately Spenser could only complete five books in his lifetime and a sixth one which is incomplete. The romance is used for moral allegory thus confirming the identity of Spenser as the most moral of all poets.

#### **4. Licentious love poetry in the Ovidian tradition:**

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was translated into English and this laid the foundation of licentious love poetry in English. Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *the Rape of Lucrece* present the very pictures of love and passion and deal with themes like young woman seducing a handsome youth or a libertine raping an innocent maiden for pleasure. Marston's *Pigmalion* is also in the same tradition.

#### **5. Dramatic Poetry:**

Plays were basically written in verse right up to 1660 i.e. the Restoration period and hence have to be considered under poetry. The University Wits consisting of Lyly, Lodge, Greene, Peele, Nashe, Kyd and Marlowe marked the beginning of the golden age of Elizabethan drama and the crowning glory came in the form of Shakespeare. The first proper English tragedy *Gorboduc* by Gascoigne and the first proper English comedy *Grammar Gurton's Needle* or *Ralph Roister Doister* by Norton and Sackville were also written in this period. Classical comedies were written by Ben Jonson. While Beaumont and Fletcher contributed significantly to the comedy, Webster and Tourneur contributed to tragedy, especially the horror type of tragedy.

#### **Conclusion:**

The above discussion shows that the Elizabethan period proved to be a very fertile one from the point of poetic output with respect to variety as well as quality. A period marked with peace as no major wars took place and whatever happened were won by England, prosperity with the horizons of trade expanding far and wide and provision of royal patronage to literary pursuits are some of the significant reasons that led to this rich poetic output.