

UNIT 5**ELIZABETHAN AGE-1 (1558 - 1603)
(HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND
CHARACTERISTICS)****STRUCTURE****5.0 Objectives****5.1 Introduction****5.2 Historical Background****5.2.1 Political Environment During Elizabethan Era****5.2.2 Cultural Background****5.3 Elizabethan Poetry****5.4 Elizabethan Drama****5.5 Elizabethan Prose****5.6 Let Us Sum Up****5.7 Key Words****5.8 Books Suggested****Answers**

5.0 OBJECTIVES

- To discuss the historical background of the Elizabethan period
- To discuss the major literary characteristics of the Elizabethan period
- To discuss the development of poetry, prose and drama in the Elizabethan period

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Elizabethan Age comprises the period of Queen Elizabeth's reign i.e. 1558 to 1603. Jacobean and Caroline periods begin after this Golden period in the history of England. Elizabethan age has been considered to be the age of change and discovery along with the extension of various literary forms including poetry, prose and drama. In addition to this, Elizabethan age has also witnessed drastic revolution and upheavals in social, historical, political and religious areas. Moreover, this age is also considered as an era of great development in areas like commerce, sea adventures, and nationalist feeling of English people in general and England as a nation in particular.

5.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Accession of Queen Elizabeth on the English Throne in 1558 marked the beginning of this great age. Milton has beautifully described this age in his words like, “We suddenly see England, a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself, like strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.”

One of the most remarkable incidents that filled England as a nation with the great spirit of Patriotism was defeating “The invincible Spanish Armada” by an English naval force under the command of Lord Charles Howard and Sir Francis Drake. According to www.history.com website, “Queen Elizabeth’s decisive defeat of the Invincible Armada made England a world-class power and introduced effective long-range weapons into naval warfare for the first time, ending the era of boarding and close-quarter fighting”. With this we can clearly see that the whole English was completely filled with patriotism and this influence can be seen in the works of all the prominent writers of this era. There has been quite a few important works highlighting the historic background of Elizabethan age. According to L G Salinger, “There were popular Moralities satirizing abuses, in which history was subordinate to general social ethics: the Armada battle in Wilson’s *Three Lords of London* (1589) for instance, is reduced to a symbolic episode (a struggle for shields) while the legendary Kings in *A Knack to know a Knave* (1592) or *Nobody and Somebody* (c.1606) are merely vague ciphers for the magistrate in general.” (Pg- 62-63) In addition to this it has been said that even Spenser used historical background of England in his famous work *Faerie Queen* just to impress or flatter the queen. Moreover, England during her reign faced Nine year war within Spain (1594 to 1603) and on this Shrinivasa Iyengar says “War was no doubt evil, but civil strife was the worst curse of all, and its spectre was seldom very far from the consciousness of the Elizabethans.”

Further, it can be marked that Expansion of horizon was one of the most important features of this age and on this Shrinivasa Iyengar has said, “The discovery – partly by design, partly by accident- of the ocean routes to the East and, more important still, the discovery of the New World, made England’s situation central between the Old World and The New, whereas it had hitherto been considered merely peripheral to the known world?”

Some of the most important historical events of Elizabethan Age were:

1558 - Accession of Queen Elizabeth to the throne of England

1571 - Rise of English Puritans

1577 - Drake’s famous voyages

1587 - *Execution of Mary Queen of Scots*
 1588 - *Defeat of Spanish Armada*
 1594—1603 - *The English War with Spain (The Nine Years War)*
 1595 - *Spanish forces burnt the town of Penzance in England*
 1597 – 2nd *Armada was sent against England by King Philip II of Spain*
 1601 - *Robert Devereux The Earl of Essex rebelled against Queen Elizabeth, and was killed on 25th February, 1601*
 24 March 1603 - *DEATH OF QUEEN ELIZABETH*
 24 March 1603 - *James I ascended the throne of England and Scotland*
 1603 - *Puritans The Millenary Petition presented before James I, for the reforms to the Church*
 1628 - *Death of James I, at the age of 58*

5.2.1 Political environment during Elizabethan Era

If one would critically evaluate the Elizabethan Era, he or she will find that the political structure was divided into different categories. The most important thing is that the Elizabethan era was following *Monarchical structure*. People at the higher ranks used to hold all the powers and Queen Elizabethan was the monarch, capital of all the powers and having rights to take all the important decisions. For the ease of governing, she had deputed some wise officials to help her in managing all her state. Still, she was the final authority and no law or rule would be passed without her consent. Elizabethan had two important official bodies namely *The Privy Council* and *the Parliament*.

The Privy Council has been an important part of Elizabethan reign and her politics. This council used to guide and assist her in taking some important political decisions. At the time of Queen Mary the council was large but Queen Elizabeth limited this with a belief that many people would cause problems with their many ideas. There were total 19 members in the council but later this number was reduced to 13 members only. The another important official body of Elizabethan reign was *Parliament*. The body was called Tudor parliament having two houses including ‘The house of Lords’ (Upper house) and ‘The house of Common’ (Lower house). Upper house was comprised of Aristocrats and Bishops whereas Lower house included common people. Common house members were elected by Elections and person with the support of local people would be the member of this house. However, only men were having the right of vote. The core objective of the parliament was to grant money to the Queen in her needs. But at the time of emergency or acute need, Queen Elizabeth had the right to take decision without their permission and this was known as Royal Proclamation.

Now if we talk about Economical condition of Elizabethan age, than we get to know that the initial years of her reign were every prosperous, but later due to increased population the state faced issues with Economic stability and poverty. The main source of the state's income was agriculture. Women were only involved in household chores and people from small towns were occupied with craftsman, butchery, bakery, tailoring, blacksmith and carpentry work. Queen Elizabeth also promoted some other trades with favourable financial contracts wherein Woolen the main one. Poverty was the most important concern for Queen Elizabeth and to overcome her government took some decisions to improve standards of living for poor.

5.2.2 Cultural Background

This age has been considered as the golden era of England. Moreover, this age was of social contentment and religious tolerance too. In addition to this, the age has been also marked other features like learning, violence, brutality, superstition and intellectual liberty. During this age science all progressed in the field of human anatomy, surgical operations and medicines. Invention of thermo-scope, hydrostatic balance by Galileo greatly benefited all but despite all these big inventions people had strong believes in superstitions and supernatural including magic, mystery, witches, ghosts, spirits, devils, etc. According to Krishna Gupta, "During the Elizabethan period much importance or significance used to be attached to certain equipments of magic such as books, robes, wands etc., without which the magicians could not perform any of the magic tricks." Such things are evident in even Shakespeare's famous drama *The Tempest*.

Further, in the court, Queen Elizabeth used to arrange festivals wherein many poets, actors, musicians and other artists used to get opportunities. Some of the famous events during this period were Shrove Tuesday, Hocktide, May Day, Whitsuntide, Midsummer Eve, Harvest – home, Halloween, and Christmas. In the words of C.L. Barber, "Here one cannot say how far analogies between social rituals and dramatic forms show an influence and how far they reflect the fact that the holiday occasion and the comedy are parallel manifestations of the same pattern of culture, of a way that men can cope with their life."

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 1

1. Discuss the historical background of Elizabethan age in brief.
2. Write a brief note on some of the historical events of Elizabethan age.
3. Discuss the Political environment during Elizabethan Era.
4. Write a brief note on the cultural background of Elizabethan Era.

5.3 ELIZABETHAN POETRY

At no time in English literary history was there so great a profusion of lyrics as in the time of Elizabeth. The air was full of music. Beginning with *The book of Songs and Sonnets* (popularly known for its publisher *Tottel's Miscellany*,) in 1557 to Davidson's *Poetic Rapsody* in 1602, the market was flooded with verse anthologies. They bore such quaint and picturesque titles as *A Handful of Pleasant Delights*, *A Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions*, *The Paradise of Dainty Devices*, *The Arbor of Amorous Devices*, etc. These anthologies contained lyrics for every taste. On the one hand there are the courtly verses written by gentlemen rank who preferred anonymity to the hazards of public opinion, and on the other hand the Ballard rimes favoured by the masses.

“The historical importance of *Tottel's Miscellany* cannot be over-rated. It is the first surviving printed communication of polite poetry to the great variety of readers. The printing press had definitely displaced the minstrel”. (*Tottel's Miscellany*, p. 117 - 119)

On these verse anthologies the most popular was *The Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1576) which reached a minimum of ten editions. The principal contributor of this anthology is Richard Edwards. But at least thirty other poets share with him the glories of this paradise. These songs are not the gay, light, carefree ditties suggested by the title. Most of the lyrics are charged with a high moral seriousness – even the love poems – and not a few are mournful in tone and distrustful of life.

In 1599 William Jaggard advertised a collection of poems entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim by William Shakespeare*. He introduced into this anthology two authentic sonnets from the Dark Lady sequence, and songs from Shakespeare's plays, more especially from *Love's Labour's Lost*. To these, he added lyrics by Marlowe and other poets contemporaneous with Shakespeare.

In 1600 appeared *England's Parnassus or the Choicest Flowers of Our Modern Poets*. The voluminous work contained over two thousand poems which were placed under title – headings such as ‘angels’, ‘temperance’, ‘sorrow’, etc. As may be surmised poems to true excellence lie side by side with mediocrity in the anthology.

The anthologies were restricted to lyrics. The song books contained both the lyrics and the music notation for their vocalization. Household singing was not uncommon in Elizabethan times, and the authors of the songs books encouraged this national pastime. Generally, speaking the songs of this period fall into two classes;

1. There were songs from three to six voices without any musical accompaniment. These songs were called madrigals, and were

particularly favoured by William Byrd. He published many songs composed both for the Roman and English Church services in the *Atlas of English Music*. Of the collection of madrigals, the most popular was Nicholas Yonge's *Musica Transalpina* (1588), and Morley's *Triumphs of Oriana to five and Six Voices* (1601). The latter is a tribute to Queen Elizabeth. It contains 25 lyrics set to music by an equal number of separate composers.

2. Other songs were sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument. These songs were generally solos, but they are also to be found in voices. The instrument most commonly used in musical accompaniment was the lute. John Dowland's songbooks appeared from 1597 to 1612 and contain an admirable selection of lyrics, a large number of which are composed by anonymous poets, and musicians. However, the most important lutenist collection was published by Thomas Campion (1567 - 1620). He was a man of exceptional talents and varied abilities, expert in law and medicine, a writer and controversialist, a poet and a musician. His musical lyrics are among the finest of Elizabethan productions.

Tottel's Miscellany appeared in 1557 and contained the sonnets of Wyatt and Surrey. These two poets, whose lyrics appeared posthumously in *Tottel's Miscellany* are the precursors of the poetic renaissance in England. Wyatt (1503-42) resided for a time in France and Italy. He influenced the Italian lyric, and fashioned the English on the contemporary Italian model. His vision of the classics was also coloured by his stay in Italy. It was not the English, but the Italian view of the classics that formed the basis of his poetic imitations. His sonnets are modeled on Petrarch. The Italian form is in keeping with the genius of the Italian language with its multiplicity of rhymes, but does not accommodate easily to the English language. Wyatt's sonnets are the glorification of womanhood, though, occasionally the poet hints that women are not what they seem.

Whereas, Surrey (1517-47) was expressly mentioned by name in the description of the *Book of Songs and Sonnets* (*Tottel's Miscellany*). Surrey appears to have been a Byronic figure, the idol of his time moulding the tastes of his reader both by precept and example. A man of such prominence could not escape the political intrigues of the times. He was executed in the prime of his life at the age of thirty.

Surrey's most original contribution to English literature is the five-foot unrhymed iambic line. The Blank verse appears for the first time in English literature in 1554. The fourth book of *the Aeneid* is described on the title page as translated into English, and drawn into a strange meter by him. This meter was probably derived from Italy. In 1534, Vergil's fourth

book was translated into Italian in a meter corresponding to English blank verse.

A great number of his poems appeared in this form with alternating lines of twelve and fourteen syllables. George Gascoigne nicknamed the meter 'Poulter's Measure'.

5.4 ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

It won't be any exaggeration to say that the drama form became the most important part of Elizabethan age passion. Many theatres were erected during this era and they were the most popular medium of entertainment for the people irrespective of their social classes. Though the supreme authority was Queen Elizabeth, other women were not allowed to perform on stage and just be the part of audience only. Comedies had an edge over tragedies. For instance, *Ralph Roister Doister* by Nicholas Udall is the first regular comic drama in English. And *Gorboduc* by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton is regarded as the first regular tragic drama in English language. A part from these writers, university wits also contributed immensely in this genre. As the age was, rich in its experimentation, offers unique content to all the literary genres, namely drama, poetry and prose. The dramatist used to follow Greek tragedies, miracle plays, morality plays, interludes and attic dramas as their models. Revenge theme was one of the most popular themes for the famous playwrights of this era. In this list we can include Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In addition to this we can also include other playwrights like Georg Champion, Thomas Heywood, Ben Johnson, Christopher Marlowe and John Lyly. Most of these dramatists used supernatural elements, as people of this age were quite superstitious in nature.

In order to engage the audience, writers used some literary devices including Aside or Soliloquy. All these factors provided drama, the highest rank among the other existing literary genres.

5.5 ELIZABETHAN PROSE

Elizabethan age has been considered as the golden era for English Poetry and Drama, however the importance of great prose writers cannot be ignored. Prose became quite popular because of the arrival of the printing press. Prose primarily dealt with the themes like amusement and Instructions. Mainly, the Elizabethan age prose can be divided into two parts, Fiction and Non-fiction. The fictions were mainly romantic in nature. Some of these writers are, Lyly, Greene, Sidney, Nashe and Delony. In the beginning, Elizabethan prose was mainly translation of Italian Novella like *Palace of Pleasure* by William Painter, *Tragically Discourses* by Geoffrey Fenton. Other Elizabethan prose writers include

Dekker, Lodge, North, etc. *Plutarch's Lives*, the translated work by Thomas North became the important work for all the prose writers of this age. Lyly's *Euphues*, *The Anatomy Wit* became notable works for its attractive alliteration, allusion and balanced phrases. In addition to this, Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, based on Spanish pastoral romance, became a mile-stone work. In this list we can mention other prose writers and their works like, Thomas Lodge's *Rosalind*, Thomas Dekker's *The Seven Deadly Sins of London* and Thomas Nash 's *The Unfortunate Traveler* or *The life of Jack Wilton*, and Richard Hokker's *Of the Ecclesiastical Policy*.

Moreover, there were also writers who tried their hands on translating Bible like William Tyndale's *New testament* from Greek and the *Old Testament* from Hebrew language. We can say that the very humanistic, romantic and liberal characteristic of this age promoted the growth of Elizabethan age prose.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 2

1. Write a brief note on the Elizabethan Poetry.

2. Write a brief note on the Elizabethan drama.

3. Write a brief note on Elizabethan prose.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 3

STATE WHETHER THE STATEMENTS ARE TRUE OR FALSE.

1. Queen Elizabeth's reign can be marked from 1558 to 1603.
2. Some of the major literary genres of Elizabethan age include Poetry, Drama, Prose, Novel, and short stories.

3. In Queen Elizabeth's reign, people were filled with radical spirit and all were full of depression.
4. Charles Howard and Sir Francis Drake commanded the force and won Spanish Armada.
5. Faerie Queen was written by Spenser in the year 1594.
6. Queen Elizabeth died in the year 1601.
7. The role of the Privy Council was to help Queen Elizabeth in Economic conditions.
8. There were total 13 member in the Privy council, but later the number was increased to 19.
9. Tottel's Miscellany first appeared in the year 1557.
10. Gorboduc is regarded as the first regular comedy by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton.

5.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we discussed the historical background of the Elizabethan age and some of the important literary characteristics. We also briefly learnt about the development of Elizabethan age's poetry, drama and prose genres in general and some prominent works in particular.

5.7 KEY WORDS

Nationalist : a person who wants his/her country or region to become independent
Hitherto : Until now
Monarch : a person who reigns over a kingdom or empire
Proclamation: an official announcement
Manifestation: a sign that something is happening
Profusion : a very large quantity of something

5.8 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. Baugh, A. C. (1948). *A Literary History of England*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
2. Evans, I. (1966). *A short history of English literature*. Penguin books.
3. Legouis, E., & Cazamian, L. F. (1927). *A history of English literature* (Vol. 2). JM Dent & Sons Limited.
4. Nayar, P. K. (2009). *A short history of English literature*. Foundation Books.
5. Sampson, G., & Churchill, R. C. (1970). *The concise Cambridge history of English literature*. Cambridge University Press.

Answers

1. T

2. F

3. F

4. T

5. F

6. T

7. F

8. T