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**LECTURE THREE:**

**The Renaissance Period (1500-1660) Part One**

**9.1. Introduction**

Although the renaissance was initiated in 1453, its impact on English life and, literature was noticed after 1500. Consequently, it is commonly admitted, that the Renaissance Period began at the beginning of the 16th century and continued till the Restoration in 1660. This era is named the Renaissance Period because the renaissance spirit was the main driving force that defined the literature of this time. This literary period of 160 years is divided into four briefer ages after the names of their political rulers: Elizabethan Age (1558-1603), Jacobean Age (1603-1625), Caroline Age (1625-1649), and Commonwealth Period (1649-1660).

**9.2. Elizabethan Age (1558-1603)**

This age is named after Queen Elizabeth I who ruled England from 1558 to 1603. This is called the Golden Age of English literature.

**9.3. Influencing Factors of the Literature of this Period**

1) With the accession of Queen Elizabeth I, royal problems and political troubles came to an end. Religious and social stability brought about national prosperity.

2) The religious Reformation inspired religious open-mindedness and secularism.

3) Elizabeth 1 introduced Anglicanism to settle religious problems. It has a long history. In the 16th century, Martin Luther of Germany and Zwingli and Calvin of Switzerland protested against the autocracy of the then Pope. Those who supported them were called Protestants and those who still supported the Pope were called the papists or Catholics. Henry VIII who was the King of England during those years supported Protestantism for his advantage. He wanted to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and marry Anne Boleyn, his fiancée, but the Pope did not approve it. Eventually, he denied Pope’s authority, married Anne Boleyn, and introduced Protestantism to England. Some of the people accepted King’s religious authority but the rest followed the Pope’s rule. This caused a bloody civil war which continued till 1558, the year Queen Elizabeth I came to power. She understood the problem and introduced Anglicanism, England’s church. This religious settlement brought stability and prosperity to England in the second half of the 16th century.

4) Land discoveries of the previous decades brought unlimited fortune during this period.

5) Renaissance that had started earlier was now very strongly felt in England. It brought ancient Greek and Roman wisdom to England. Erasmus[[1]](#footnote-2) reached England, and with John Colet, taught humanism and other ideals of the renaissance.

6) Spirit of nationalism marked the social life of England. humanism, liberal religious views, scientific curiosity, social content, intellectual progress, and unlimited enthusiasm are also present factors that enhanced the literary creations.

**9.4. Major authors of the Period and their Major Works**

Thomas More (1478-1535): *Utopia* (or the Kingdom of Nowhere). The book was originally written in Latin in 1516.

Norton (1532-84) and Sackville (1536-1608): *Gorboduc* (1562), the first English tragedy.

Edmund Spenser (1552-99): He is called the poet of the poets because many later English poets followed his art of poetry. *The Faerie Queen* (1590) *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1579)

Nicholas Udall: *Ralph Roister Doister* (1553), the first English Comedy

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86): *An Apology for Poetry* (1595): a critical treatise. *Arcadia* (1590): a book that conceives the seed of the English novel.

John Lyly (1554-1606): He is called a university wit. *Campaspe* (1584) *Sapho and Phao* (1584)

Midas (1589), *Euphues* (1579).

Thomas Kyd (1557-1595): He is another university wit. *The Spanish Tragedy* (1585)

Robert Greene (1558-92): He is another university wit. *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1589), James*-IV* (1591).

George Peele (1558-98): He is another university wit[[2]](#footnote-3). *David and Bethsabe* (1599), Arraignment of Paris (1 584).

Francis Bacon (1561-1626): He is called a natural philosopher. *Essays* (1597)

Christopher Marlowe (1564-93): He is another university wit. *Tamburlaine the Great Part I & II* (1587-88) *The Jew of Malta* (1 589) Edward II (1591) Doctor Faustus (1592)

William Shakespeare (1564-1616): The greatest English dramatist, famous for the objective literary portaryal of his deep knowledge about human psychology. He is often called the Bard of Avon[[3]](#footnote-4). He wrote 37 plays and 154 sonnets. Of the total of 37 plays, he wrote the subsequent 25 before Queen Elizabeth’s 1 death:

*Henry VI* (1st Part 1591-92*), Henry VI* (2nd Part 1591-92*), Henry VI* (3rd Part 1 591-92), *Richard III* (1593), *The Comedy of Errors* (1593), *Titus Andronicus* (1594), *The Taming of the Shrew (1594), Love’s Labour's Lost (1594), Romeo and Juliet* (1594), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1595), *King John* (1595), *Richard II* ( 1596), *The Merchant of Venice* ( 1 596), *Henry IV* (1st Part. 1597) *Henry IV* (2nd Part. 1598), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598), *Henry V*(1599)*, Julius Caesar* (1599), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600), *As You Like It* (1600)*, Hamlet* (1601), *Twelfth Night* (1601), *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), *All’s Well That Ends Well*(1602).

Thomas Nashe (1567- 1601): He is also called a university wit. *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594).

Ben Jonson (1573-1637): A neo-classicist though he wrote in a time when the romantic mode of literature was prevalent. He is called a neo-classicist because he percisted writing according to the classical rules of drama: *Every Man out of His Humour* (1600) *Every Man in His Humour* (1601).

Beaumont (1584-1616) and Fletcher (1579-1625): *Philaster* (1611) *A King and No King* (1611) *The Maid’s Tragedy* (1610).

**9.5. Prevailing Literary Features of the Age**

1) Elizabethan literature shows an outstanding multiplicity of artistic genius.

2) It displays novelties in dramatic and poetic forms and techniques.

3) The Renaissance spirit is the pivotal influencer of the literature of this age, chiefly by the Renaissance literature of Italy, France, and Spain.

4) In style it demonstrates romantic enthusiasm.

5) It is marked by the dominance of writings produced by men (not women) from all social classes.

6) It is an age of fine poetry, incomparable drama, and fine prose.

7) It marks a shift from man’s Fate to his free will.

8) Literature develops the English language to a level of stable standard.

9) Its character extends from the Platonic idealism or the pleasant romance to the level of coarse realism.

10) The literature of this age shows pursuit of the remote, the wonderful, and the beautiful.

11) It reflects unique romanticism that invigorated during the beginning of the Romantic Age in 1798.

12) Literary criticism started to show due to the increase of the analytic spirit among the intellectuals.

1. **Erasmus**, in full **Desiderius Erasmus,** (1469 -1536) Dutch [humanist](https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanism) and the greatest scholar of the northern [Renaissance](https://www.britannica.com/event/Renaissance), the first editor of the [New Testament](https://www.britannica.com/topic/New-Testament), and also an important figure in [patristics](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patristic-literature) and [classical literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/classical-literature). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. University wits are a group of young dramatists who wrote and performed in London towards the end of the 16th century. They are named university wits because they were the most witty and humorous students of Cambridge and oxford. Marlowe, kyd, Nashe, Greene, Lyly, Lodge and Peele were known members of this group. They upheld the classical ideals, and ridiculed the crudeness of the new English plays. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Bard means a poet or verse maker, Avon is the native city of William Shakespeare childhood before he went to London. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)