**Elizabethan Age (The Age of Shakespeare)**

**An Overview of the Elizabethan Age:**

**Elizabethan literature** refers to the body of works written during the reign of Elizabeth I of England (1558–1603), probably the most splendid age in the history of English literature, during which such writers as Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Roger Ascham, Richard Hooker, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare flourished.

**The Elizabethan age** saw the flowering of poetry (the sonnet, the Spenserian stanza, dramaticblank verse), was a golden age of drama (especially for the plays of Shakespeare), and inspired a wide variety of splendid prose (from historical chronicles, versions of the Holy Scriptures, pamphlets, and literary criticism ). So, the Elizabethan era saw a great flourishing of literature, especially in the field of drama. The Italian Renaissance had rediscovered the ancient Greek and Roman theatre, and this was instrumental in the development of the new drama, which was then beginning to evolve apart from the old mystery and miracle plays of the Middle Ages.

**\*Poetry and prose:**

-Sir Thomas Wyatt introduced the Sonnet in England whereas Surrey wrote the first blank verse in English.

-Thomas Wyatt followed the Italian poet Petrarch to compose sonnets.

-Surrey’s blank verse is remarkable. Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton and many other writers made use of it.

-Tottel’s Songs and Sonnets (1557) is the first printed anthology of English poetry. It contained 40 poems by Surrey and 96 by Wyatt.

-In 1609, a collection of Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets was printed. These sonnets were addressed to one “Mr. W.H.”. The most probable explanation of the identity of “W.H.” is that he was William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke.

-One of the most important poets of Elizabethan period is Edmund Spenser (1552-1599). His pastoral poem, The Shepheardes Calendar (1579) is in 12 books, one for each month of the year. Spenser‟s Amoretti, 88 Petrarchan sonnets celebrates his progress of love. The joy of his marriage with Elizabeth Boyle is expressed in his ode Epithalamion. His Prothalamion is written in honour of the double marriage of the daughters of the Earl of Worcester. Spenser‟s allegorical poem, The Faerie Queene is his greatest achievement. The verse has nine lines and the rhyme plan is ababbcbcc. This verse is known as the ‘Spenserian Stanza".

-Sir Philip Sidney is remembered for his prose romance, Arcadia.

-Michael Drayton and Sir Walter Raleigh are other important poets of Elizabethan England.

-John Lyly, Thomas Kyd, George Peele, Thomas Lodge, Robert Green, Christopher Marlowe, and Thomas Nash also wrote good number of poems. John Lyly is most widely known as the author of prose romance entitled Euphues(1579).

-John Donne’s works add the beauty of Elizabethan literature. He was the chief figure of Metaphysical Poetry. Donne’s poems are noted for their originality and striking images and conceits. Satires, Songs and Sonnets, Elegies, The Flea, A Valediction: forbidding mourning, A Valediction of weeping etc. are his famous works.

-Sir Francis Bacon is a versatile genius of Elizabethan England. He is considered as the father of English essays.

-Ben Jonson’s essays are compiled in The Timber or Discoveries. Jonson is considered as the father of English literary criticism.

**\*Drama :**

-The chief literary glory of the Elizabethan age was its drama. The most notable figures are Christopher Marlow, Thomas Kyd, Thomas Nash, Thomas Lodge, Robert Greene, George Peele , Ben Jonson , John Webster and of course William Shakespeare.

-The first regular English comedy was Ralph Roister Doister by Nicholas Udall.

- The first English tragedy was Gorboduc, in blank verse. The first three acts of Gorboduc writtern by Thomas Norton and the other two by Thomas Sackville.

- Christopher Marlowe was the greatest of pre-Shakespearean dramatist. Marlowe wrote only tragedies. His most famous works are Edward II, Tamburlaine the Great, The Jew of Malta, The Massacre at Paris, and Doctor Faustus. Marlow epopularized the blank verse.

- Thomas Kyd‟s The Spanish Tragedy resembles Shakespeare‟s Hamlet. Its horrific plot that gave the play a great and lasting popularity.

**-The greatest figure of Elizabethan Drama is William Shakespeare. His works include the following :**

**1.The Early Comedies:** in these immature plays the plots are not original. The characters are less finished and the style lacks the genius of Shakespeare. They are full of wit and word play. Of this type are The Comedy of Errors, Love’s Labour’s Lost, and The Two Gentlemen of Verona.

**2.The English Histories**: These plays show a rapid maturing of Shakespeare‟s technique. His characterization has improved. The plays in this group are Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V.

**3.The Mature Comedies:** The jovial good humour of Sir Toby Belch in Twelfth Night, the urban worldywise comedy of Touchstone in As You Like It, and the comic scenes in The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado About Nothing etc. are full of vitality. They contain many comic situations.

**4.The Sombre Plays:** In this group are All’s Well that Ends Well, Measure for Measure, and Trolius and Cressida. These plays show a pessimistic attitude to life and are realistic in plot.

**. 5. The Great Tragedies:** Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and King Lear are the climax of Shakespeare’s art. These plays stand supreme in intensity of emotion, depth of psychological insight, and power of style.

**. 6. The Roman Plays**: Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus etc. follow the great tragic period. Unlike Marlowe, Shakespeare is relaxed in the intensity of tragedy.

**7. The Last Plays:** The notable last plays of Shakespeare are Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, and The Tempest.

The immense power and variety of Shakespeare’s work have led to the idea that one man cannot have written it all; yet it must be true that one man did. Thus Shakespeare remains as the greatest English dramatist even after centuries of his death.