

The Renaissance and the Elizabethan Age (1430 - 1630)



Historical Background

Known as the period of "Rebirth of Learning" the Renaissance had its origins in the 14th Century, and slowly came to its highest point in the 15th Century. The Renaissance brought the Middle Ages to an end and introduced modern age.

After the Roman Empire fell apart and was conquered by the barbaric tribes, a great number of Latin and Greek manuscripts were either lost or misplaced. In the 14th and 15th Centuries they were finally rediscovered and reproduced using the printing press which had been recently invented around the year 1420. These classics set forth a movement of worship for classical philosophy which started in Italy, reached France and finally swept England. The dissemination of these new ideas was aided by the swift growth of trade in Europe and in the New World, thus communication between countries and cultures was at its strongest.

The ancient Greeks and Romans believed that life was not a tortuous and painful journey to a better life after death, as it had been considered in the Middle Ages, but, a beautiful and exciting end in itself. They believed that the world was not merely where humans were to be disciplined for life after death; but also a place where people could demonstrate their impressive creative faculties.

Those who took up this human-oriented point of view were known as Humanists. Humanists dealt with all issues of human interest. They read Greek and Latin, and were polyglots. They could play their own songs on the lute they participated in a variety of physical activities and sports. They were up-to-date on the philosophical and theological trends of their time as well as being aware of developments in the

natural philosophy of science. One of the best known of the Italian Renaissance artists, Leonardo da Vinci, thought himself a scientist as well as an artist when he stated that the artist is the person uniquely qualified to reproduce scientific knowledge authentically.

The period in which the English medieval baron, knight, serf and the Catholic churchmen lost their dominant position in society and the national government agent, the well-to-do urban merchant, the Protestant reformer and the scholar gained a new social respectability, bears the name of Queen Elizabeth I for several reasons. Not only did she rule longer than any of the other Tudors, but the tremendous political, religious, economic, and intellectual changes that had been in the making under her father and grandfather finally came to a climax during her reign and resulted in what came to be called the finest flowering of the arts in all English history. Elizabeth received a Renaissance education and read widely in the Greek and Latin classics. Thus becoming a great patron of the arts, gathering around her the best writers of her day. Elizabeth can be considered the greatest of the Tudor monarchs for when she came to the throne, England was dangerously close to falling apart under the pressures and dangers from within and from without the country, but Elizabeth met these dangers with a high statesmanship that brought the country safely through stormy times..



Elizabeth I

The Development of the Language

When Caxton introduced the printing press to England in 1476, the English language began to settle down to a relatively stable, standardized form of expression. Chaucer would not have been able to read the Old English of Beowulf. Shakespeare would have found the Middle English of Chaucer strange. But we, fortunately enough, can read the Modern English of Shakespeare. To be sure, the pronunciation in Shakespeare's day differed in many ways from our own; new words have entered the language in the intervening centuries; other words are now obsolete; still others have changed meaning. But these differences are more than offset by the fact that Shakespeare's grammar and spelling are essentially modern English.

Paradoxically enough, the printing press worked not only for uniformity of language; it also worked for unrestrained variety. Confronted with the printing page and tremendously stimulated by the new experiences and ideas of the Renaissance, the

Elizabethans became intoxicated with words and the fantastic things that could be done with them. They loved extravagant expressions, complicated figures of speech, made up words by the dozens, and borrowed words freely from other languages. They coined many words: Shakespeare is credited with '*fool*', '*disgraceful*', '*countless*', '*critic*', '*laughable*'. Other writers added '*dimension*', '*scientific*', '*obscure*'.

Many borrowings had classical sources, e.g. '*appendix*', '*comprehensible*', '*emphasis*', '*monopoly*', '*pathetic*'. Different languages also contributed: '*cameo*' and '*violin*' came from Italian. '*Detail*', '*ticket*', and '*explore*' from French. '*Apricot*', '*cocoa*', '*potato*' and '*tobacco*' from Arabic and American Indian. '*Tea*' from China, '*caravan*' from Persia and '*alpaca*' from South America. The development of the language during the Elizabethan age shows the natural course of growth. Minor changes in grammar and major changes in vocabulary are typical in times of peace and prosperity.

The Sonnet

The most significant literary development during the Elizabethan age came in the area of poetry. Favoring lyric poetry, rather than the narrative poems preferred by the medieval predecessors, the Elizabethan poets perfected the sonnet. A lyric, originally intended as a song to be accompanied by a stringed instrument, it is an expression of personal emotion or mood, either real or imagined. 16th Century lyrics reveal a passionate concern with issues of life and death; happiness and sadness are found together. One of the favorite themes is the notion that by writing poems a person confers immortality on himself and on the people he wrote about. A sonnet is a poem of fourteen lines on a single theme, friendship and love are the favorites. Usually the last two lines contain a change in the direction of the theme. Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets and is considered the best sonneteer of the period.

Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometimes declines;
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

DISCUSSION:

1. In what manner is sonnet 18, by Shakespeare, typical of the conventions of sonnet writing?
2. What change in the direction of thought occurs in the last two lines of the sonnet?
3. From where does Shakespeare get the imagery contained in the sonnet?
4. How does this sonnet reflect the society and times in which it was written?