

3. The Renaissance Period (1500–1660)

‘*The Age of Chaucer*’ was followed by *The Renaissance Period* also known as the *Elizabethan Period* or the *Age of Shakespeare* in the history of English literature.

It is, in fact, the ‘golden age’ in the history of English literature. After the *Middle Ages* in Europe came the Renaissance, meaning revival or rebirth. As a result, the darkness of the middle ages was replaced by the enlightenment of the human mind with the ‘Revival of Learning’, which the Renaissance prompted.

The major characteristic of the Renaissance was its focus on Humanism i.e. man’s concern with himself as an object of observation. The Renaissance actually started Italy by Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. However, it became popular in Europe during the Elizabethan Period. Beside focusing on the ‘study of mankind’, Renaissance had numerous subordinate trends which were actually the significant aspects of Humanism. These include:

- The rediscovery of classical antiquity, particularly of ancient Greece.
- The rediscovery of the external universe, and its importance for man.
- The problems of human personality.
- The enhanced sensitivity to formal beauty, and the cultivation of the aesthetic sense.
- The belief that men are responsible for their own actions.

Instead of looking up to some higher authority for guidance, as was done in The Middle Ages, the writers of the Renaissance Period found guidance from within.

Poets of Renaissance period

(i) Philip Sidney

[Philip Sidney](#) is one of the most important poets in English Renaissance literature. His poetry is what is constituted as “good” poetry. His work was not only hugely influential, but it also helped to shape what would become a new form of poetry in England during this period.

[Philip Sidney](#) is one of the most underrated poets of the English Renaissance.

He wrote poems such as *Astrophil and Stella* and *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* that influenced poets in England during this era. Philip is also widely considered a very underrated poet because while his work may have been hugely influential,

So while Philip wrote some beautiful poems about love and politics (his subjects tended to focus on these areas), they never achieved much popularity.

(ii) Edmund Spenser

It was in 1590 when [Edmund Spenser](#) released *The Faerie Queene*, an epic poem that would go on to have a profound impact on all of English literature.

The Faerie Queene influenced society so much that he became one of the first poets to be published as an individual rather than just being included in anthologies compiled by other

writers; his work was also heavily studied throughout Europe for its allegorical significance. It has been argued that Spenser “was not just a poet but also the founding father” of English literature.

The Faerie Queene is one of the most influential works ever written in England, and it has had a massive impact on all subsequent writers who have used allegory to explore moral or political questions. This poem helped cement poetry’s role as an essential vehicle for intellectual exploration in Britain, and its influence can still be seen today across many writing genres.

The Faerie Queene, published during the Renaissance period, bridged medieval society with early modernity; this publication would shape literary tradition within British culture and abroad. Edmund Spenser would have a tremendous influence on many other writers; this includes [John Milton](#), William Wordsworth and Alfred Tennyson.

The poem helped to popularise allegorical narrative, which is regarded as one of the most effective literature methods for exploring moral questions or political issues.

(iii) [John Milton](#)

John Milton’s poetry has had a tremendous impact on the English Renaissance era. His contributions to England include “Paradise Lost” and “Paradise Regained”.

These two poems are considered one of the most critical works in English literature because they were both published when there was much debate about religion. The religious argument was deciding whether people could be saved from eternal damnation through faith alone (without good deeds).

Milton’s writings show that he advocates for morals and virtues, which are learned by living life with integrity. He believed that people could only have peace of mind if they live their lives according to God’s plan rather than their desires.

His poetry impacted the English Renaissance era in many ways, but most notably by influencing other poets, such as John Dryden and Samuel Johnson, to follow his poetic style.

Milton’s poems were also influenced by other literary works, including Homer’s Odyssey and Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy. In this way, he helped to shape what would become a popular form of literature at that time – the epic poem.

(iv) [William Shakespeare](#)

[William Shakespeare](#) is most well-known for his work as a playwright, but he was also an accomplished poet. Many of his plays were originally written as poems and then later translated into prose. His poetry has profoundly impacted the English language during the Renaissance era and beyond, changing how people speak and how they think about and express themselves.

These [poems have had an enormous](#) impact on both literature and historical events during the time because they were so provocative; it was common for them to be printed first before

being translated into prose or acted out by actors during this time which meant that much like today these pieces could quickly go viral within hours.

His poems and plays have been translated into almost every language worldwide, and his work has impacted theatre, poetry, and literature for centuries. We've already covered the life and times of [William Shakespeare](#), and **you can read more about his extraordinary journey here.**

(v) [John Donne](#)

In the English Renaissance era, John Donne's poetry was a vital source of inspiration for his contemporaries and those to come after him. Perhaps this is because he wrote about topics that were important in his time. One such topic is religion (specifically his experience with Catholicism). He chose Death as his theme in many of the poems

The Canonization, Death Be Not Proud are the most famous poem of John Donne with its opening lines especially being extremely popular. Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

Donne's writings were felt to be a vital source of inspiration for his contemporaries in the English Renaissance era and those to come after him. This is likely because [John Donne](#) wrote about essential topics during this time – one such topic was religion (specifically his experience with Catholicism). Some of his religious poems are often used in sermons today.

(vi) [Thomas Wyatt](#)

In the English Renaissance era, Thomas Wyatt's poetry was vastly influential in shaping England's national identity. His poems and translations were at the forefront of literary development during that period. They served as a form of protest against the strictures imposed by King Henry VIII upon his subjects.

He was a contemporary of William Shakespeare, who also impacted this period with his plays and sonnets. [Wyatt](#) also wrote a poem called "In your absence", one of the most well known allegorical poems in English literature. We still celebrate him for pioneering literary devices, imagery, and other poetic aspects

Thomas Wyatt's influence on this period makes him a key author to study and read today.. The impact he has made on shaping England's national identity remains relevant today with how it continues to inspire writers nearly 500 years later.

(vii) [Christopher Marlowe](#)

[Christopher Marlowe](#) was an English poet, playwright, and translator of the Elizabethan era. As one of the most celebrated writers of his time, he probably helped spread Renaissance ideas more than any other writer. His work is often compared to poetry by John Donne and [William Shakespeare](#).

Marlowe's poetry impacted English Renaissance literature by introducing a revolutionary tone into his work that makes his poems more interesting than anything else being written at

the time. One example would be how he mocked religion with his play “The Jew of Malta.” His words are raw and emotional as if they were pulled straight out of him. The themes in his poems are often dark and deal with death or other subjects that were not typically seen in poetry before he came along.

(viii) [Walter Raleigh](#)

[Walter Raleigh](#) was a poet, explorer, and courtier who is most well known for his sonnet sequence “The Ocean to Cynthia”. He had many different styles of poems, including sonnets and odes about love and politics that were often satirical or mocking in tone.

Raleigh’s work reflects the new interests of his contemporaries like courtly love and political satire, which can be seen through his works such as “A Letter to His Son”, where he talks about how great it would be if England becomes a republic again. He wrote what is arguably the most important poem of the Elizabethan era, “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd”, which has been called one of England’s greatest love poems. Raleigh’s work is still read today because of its timeless quality. He wrote poems about love, nature, and political views that were later published into books called “The Passionate Man’s Pilgrimage” and “The Nymph’s Reply.” His work influenced many poets during this time, such as [William Shakespeare](#).

3.1. Elizabethan Drama

During the Renaissance Period the most important achievement in English literature was in the field of drama. The dramatists of this golden period include William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Lyly, George Peele, Thomas Kyd, Robert Greene and others. All these writers produced prolific works. However, the greatest among all Elizabethan dramatists was Shakespeare in whose hands the Elizabethan drama reached its climax. He took English drama to the level which could not be surpassed till today.

Who is the Father of English Drama? William Shakespeare is called the ‘Father of English Drama.’

The main characteristics of the Elizabethan drama include—revenge themes, internal conflicts, good versus evil, melodramatic scenes, hero-villain protagonists, tragic-comedy, presence of supernatural beings such as ghosts and witches and the use of blank verse. Here are some famous dramatists of the Elizabethan Period:

3.1.1. Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

There was a famous group of dramatists in the Elizabethan Period known as ‘University Wits’. It was actually a professional set of literary men. Of all the members of this group Marlowe was the greatest, while other dramatists such as Lyly, Peele, Greene, Lodge, and Nash were minor artists.

Nevertheless, Marlowe’s contributions to the Elizabethan drama were remarkable. Although his plays were different from Shakespeare’s in content and style, yet he raised the subject-matter of drama to a higher level. It was Marlowe who gave beauty, dignity, and poetic glow

to the drama. There is no doubt that he did the groundwork on which Shakespeare built the grand edifice. Therefore, Marlowe has been rightly called “**the Father of English Dramatic Poetry.**”

Christopher Marlowe is also known as the ‘**Child of Renaissance**’

Marlowe’s first play *Tamburlaine* appeared in 1587 and took the public on a storm due to its impetuous force, sensitivity to beauty, and splendid command of blank verse. His other famous work, however, include *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* which tells the story of a scholar who sells his soul to the devil for unlimited power and worldly enjoyment. The third famous tragic play of Marlowe is *The Jew of Malta*. Though it has a glorious opening, it is not as fine as *Doctor Faustus*. Marlowe’s last play is *Edward II* which is best from technical point of view but lacks the rhythmic beauty as well as grandeur of his earlier plays.

3.1.2. William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

It was Shakespeare, the greatest of all Elizabethan dramatists, who took English drama to the highest peak of fame. He was, indeed, a gifted man. His brilliant imagination, keen insight, and a creative mind gave new life to the old familiar stories and made them glow with tenderest feelings and deepest thoughts. His style and versification were extremely remarkable. He was not only the greatest dramatist of his time, but also a famous poet as well. His sonnets, replete with passion and aesthetic sense, also possess a significant place in the history of English literature. Although Shakespeare belonged to the Elizabethan Age, due to his universality he belongs to all times.

Shakespeare’s works include non-dramatic poetry consisting of two narrative poems, *Venice and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, 154 sonnets, and 37 plays. His work as a dramatist extends over some 24 years (1588-1612), and is divided into *four* periods.

Overview of Shakespearean period:

1577-1593: First Period

This period includes Shakespeare’s early experimental work. The famous works of this period are: the revision of old plays as the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Titus Andronicus*; his first comedies—*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *The Comedy of Errors* ; his first chronicle play—*Richard III*; and his most famous youthful tragedy—*Romeo and Juliet*.

1594-1600: Second Period

This period reveals Shakespeare’s development as a great thinker and artist. The works of this period includes Shakespeare’s great comedies and chronicle plays such as: *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *King John*, *Henry V*, *Part I and II*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Training of the Shrew*, *As You Like It*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Twelfth Night*.

1601-1608: Third Period

This period includes Shakespeare's greatest tragedies and somber comedies. His main concern there is to reveal the darker side of human personality and its destructive passions. The major works of this period are: *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Coriolanus*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Timon of Athens*.

1608-1612: Fourth Period

This period includes Shakespeare's later dramatic romances and comedies. Here we see a decline in his power of thought and expression. Still his plays are tender and gracious. The famous works of this period are: *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, and *Cymbeline*. He wrote all these plays in collaboration with other dramatists.

3.1.3. Ben Jonson (1573-1637)

Ben Jonson was Shakespeare's contemporary as well as a prominent dramatist of his times. But he was just the opposite of Shakespeare. A moralist, reformer, and a classist, Jonson in his works presented a true picture of contemporary society. He wrote his plays in a realistic manner and introduced his theory of 'humour'. His famous comedies are: *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew*, *Fair*, *Volpone*, *Every Man in His Humour*, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, and *The Silent Woman*.

3.1.4. Other Major Figures

There were many other playwrights who were part of the Golden Age of English Drama. For instance, Lyly wrote *Euphues*, *Sapho and Phao*, *Midas*, *Endymion* and *Compaspe*. Thomas Kyd wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*. Robert Greene wrote *Orlando Furioso*. Compared to the works of the greatest dramatists of this period, their works are of little importance.

William Tyndale is known as '**The Father of English Prose**'

3.1.5. The Puritan Age (1600-1660) or John Milton's Age

In the 17th century came the decline of the Renaissance spirit. The writers of that time either imitated the Elizabethan masters or paved new paths. The 17th century's literature is divided into two periods—*The Puritan Age or the Age of Milton* (1600-1660) and the *Restoration Period* or the *Age of Dryden* (1660-1700). Up to 1660, Puritanism dominated the 17th Century. John Milton was the greatest representative of the Puritan spirit. The Puritan movement in literature is also called the **second Renaissance** because of the **revival of man's moral nature**. It stood for people's liberty from the shackles of the despotic ruler and introduced morality and high ideals in politics.

John Milton (1608-1674) was the most significant poet of the Puritan Age. He was a great scholar of classical as well as Hebrew literature. A child of the Renaissance, Milton was also a great humanist. As an artist we may call him the last Elizabethan. Milton's greatest poetical works are *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. Besides Milton, the poetry of *The School of Spencer*, *The Metaphysical Poets*, and *The Cavalier Poets* also

earned great fame. But no one of them was as noblest and indomitable representative of the Puritan spirit as John Milton.

Moreover, this period was rich in prose as well. Among the great prose writers of the Puritan Age include Francis Bacon, Milton, Robert Burton, Jeremy Tayler, Sir Thomas Brown and Clarendon. During this period we find English prose developing into a magniloquent and rich instrument capable of expressing all types of ideas, such as scientific, philosophical, poetic, religious and personal.

General Characteristics of the Age of Milton

(i) Civil War:

The entire period was dominated by the civil war, which divided the people into two factions, one loyal to the King and the other opposed to him. English people had remained one and united and loyal to the sovereign. The crisis began when James I, who had received the right of royalty from an Act of Parliament, gave too much premium to the Divine Right and began to ignore Parliament which had created him. The Puritans, who had become a potent force in the social life of the age, heralded the movement for constitutional reforms. The hostilities, which began in 1642, lasted till the execution of Charles I in 1649. There was little political stability during the interregnum of eleven years which followed. These turbulent years saw the establishment of the Commonwealth, the rise of Oliver Cromwell, the confusion which followed upon his death, and, finally, the restoration of monarchy in 1660.

(ii) The Puritan Movement:

The Renaissance, which exercised immense influence on Elizabethan literature, was essentially pagan and sensuous. It did not concern the moral nature of man, and it brought little relief from the despotism of rulers. "The Puritan movement," says W. J. Long, "may be regarded a second and greater Renaissance, a rebirth of the moral nature of man following the intellectual awakening of Europe in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries." In Germany and England the Renaissance was accompanied by a moral awakening, "that greatest moral and political reform which ever swept 'over a nation in the short space of half a century', which is meant by the Puritan movement.

Puritanism had two chief objects:

- i. the first was personal righteousness;
- ii. the second was civil and personal liberty. In other words, it aimed to make men honest and to make them free.
- iii. "Though the spirit of the Puritan movement was profoundly religious, the Puritans were not a religious sect; neither was the Puritan a narrow-minded and gloomy dogmatist, as he is still pictured in the histories." Hampden, Eliot, Milton, Hooker and Cromwell were Puritans.
- iv. Puritanism included all shades of belief. In course of time "Puritanism became a great national movement. It included English Churchmen as well as extreme Separatists, Calvinists, Covenanters, Catholic noblemen,— all bound together in resistance to despotism in Church and State, and with a passion for liberty and righteousness such as the world has never since seen," says W. J. Long.

- v. During the Puritan rule of Cromwell severe laws were passed, simple pleasures were forbidden, theatres were closed, and an austere standard of living was forced upon an unwilling people. So there was rebellion against Puritanism, which ended with the Restoration of King Charles II.

Literary Characteristics of the Age of Milton

(i) Influence of Puritanism:

The influence of Puritanism upon English life and literature was profound. The spirit which it introduced was fine and noble but it was hard and stern. The Puritan's integrity and uprightness is unquestionable but his fanaticism, his moroseness and the narrowness of his outlook and sympathies were deplorable. In his over-enthusiasm to react against prevailing abuses, he denounced the good things of life, condemned science and art, ignored the appreciation of beauty, which invigorates secular life. Puritanism destroyed human culture and sought to confine human culture within the circumscribed field of its own particular interests. It was fatal to both art and literature.

Puritanism created confusion in literature. Sombreness and pensiveness pervaded poetry of this period. The spirit of gaiety, of youthful vigour and vitality, of romance and chivalry which distinguished Elizabethan literature was conspicuous by its absence. In the words of W. J. Long: "Poetry took new and startling forms in Donne and Herbert, and prose became as sombre as Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. The spiritual gloom which sooner or later fastens upon all writers of this age, and which is unjustly attributed to Puritan influence, is due to the breaking up of accepted standards in religion and government. This so-called gloomy age produced some minor poems of exquisite workmanship, and one great master of verse whose work would glorify any age or people, —John Milton, in whom the indomitable Puritan spirit finds its noblest expression."

(ii) Want of Vitality and Concreteness:

The literature of this period lacks in concreteness and vitality. Shakespeare stands first and foremost for the concrete realities of life; his words and phrases tingle with vitality and thrill with warmth. Milton is concerned rather with theorising about life, his lines roll over the mind with sonorous majesty, now and again thrilling us as Shakespeare did with the fine excess of creative genius, but more often impressing us with their stateliness and power, than moving us by their tenderness and passion. Puritanism began with Ben Jonson, though it found its greatest prose exponent in Bunyan. W. J. Long writes: "Elizabethan literature is generally inspiring; it throbs with youth and hope and vitality. That which follows speaks of age and sadness; even its brightest hours are followed by gloom, and by the pessimism inseparable from the passing of old standards."

(iii) Want of the Spirit of Unity:

Despite diversity, the Elizabethan literature was marked by the spirit of unity, which resulted from the intense patriotism and nationalism of all classes, and their devotion and loyalty to the Queen who had a singleminded mission to seek the nation's welfare. During this period James I and Charles II were hostile to the interests of the people. The country was divided by the struggle for political and religious liberty; and the literature was as divided in spirit as were the struggling parties.

(iv) Dominance of Critical and Intellectual Spirit:

The critical and intellectual spirit, instead of the romantic spirit which prevailed on Elizabethan literature, dominates the literature of this period. W. J. Long writes: "In the literature of the Puritan period one looks in vain for romantic ardour. Even in the lyrics and love poems a critical, intellectual spirit takes its place, and whatever romance asserts itself is in form rather than in feeling, a fantastic and artificial adornment of speech rather than the natural utterance of a heart in which sentiment is so strong and true that poetry is its only expression."

(v) Decay of Drama:

This period is remarkable for the decay of drama. The civil disturbances and the strong opposition of the Puritans was the main cause of the collapse of drama. The actual dramatic work of the period was small and unimportant. The closing of the theatres in 1642 gave a final jolt to the development of drama.