

Chief Characteristics of Elizabethan Poetry

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Abstract:

Elizabethan Age is the time period associated with the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and is often considered to be a golden age in English history. It was an age considered to be the height of the English Renaissance, and saw the full flowering of English literature and English poetry. This paper aims to find out the chief characteristics of Elizabethan Poetry.

Keywords: Elizabeth, Poetry, Prose, Shakespeare, Marlowe, University Wits

The Elizabethan Poetry (1558-1603):

The age of Shakespeare or the Elizabethan Age witnessed of the reddest periods in the history of England. The Age witnessed the rise and growth of the feelings of patriotism and nationalism among the English people and brought about an unprecedented progress in almost all the branches of its variegated life. The age is considered as “The Golden Age” in the history of English literature. It was the age of Queen Elizabethan 1st (1558-1603) comprising the half of 16th century. It was an age in which the mind of the people was set free from the trammels of Medievalism from free of religious persecution from fear of poverty and starvation and from the fear of foreign invasion. It was an age/era of social, political and religious peace. Men were now free to devote themselves to art and literatures. It was also an era of great adventures, travel and discovery which fired the imagination of the people and impelled them to creative activity. It is therefore called a “Golden Age of English Literature.”

The Elizabethan Age extends from 1558-1603. It can be divided into two periods. The first period may be called “Age of Spenser” (1558-1579) and the second may be called “Age of Shakespeare” (1579-1603). In the first part we have the time of preparation of the spring tide of Elizabethan literature, the second is the time of full blossom and fruition. In this great age there were many factors which contributed to the richness in literature. There was a ‘Renaissance’ (revival or rebirth) of ancient Greek and Roman literature, mythology and culture and this served as a source of inspiration to the countless writers of the period. There was also an awakening of the human mind to the vastness, beauty and wonder of the world as a result of adventure undertaken by the sailors of England of other countries of Europe. The whole age was marked by rich poetic sensibility, nature appetite for learning, and literature and love for aesthetic faculty. England was poetically barren in the 15th century, but with the revival of the art and learning a gleam of hope was produced. There was such a growth of poets and singers that this age was called “Nest of Singing Birds”. By virtue of its wonderful fertility and variety and splendour of its production, this period as whole ranks one of the greatest age in the history of world’s literature. Men like SPENSER, BECON and SHAKESPEARE grew from boyhood in the youth in the early years of Elizabethan Age and they produced wonderful works of literature by the 16th century.

The Elizabethan poetry is neither classical nor romantic. It lacks the restrict and economy, the mental repose of the finest classical art but following the main tradition of antiquity and the middle ages. It is addressed to reason as a universal moral guide. The Elizabethan poet is continually, reasoning, persuading, demonstrating analogics and logical connections. Even his imagery and rhythm are marshalled into argument.

Poets of Elizabethan Poetry:

The poets who contributed much to the growth of Elizabethan Poetry were SIR THOMAS WYATT and EARL OF SURREY who revives interest in poetry by writing sonnets and lyrics. It is they who for the first time introduced “Sonnet” in England. It is they who paved the way for the full flowering of poetry in the hands of SYDNEY, SPENSER and SHAKESPEARE.

SIR THOMAS WYATT (1503-42):

Thomas Wyatt was the first poet who introduced the ‘sonnet’ in English poetry by restoring beauty, grace and nobility to English Poetry. He visited Italy, France and Greece and like Chaucer he wanted to fashion English poetry on the Italian pattern or on the model of Petrarch. It was by the sonnet that lyricism again entered into English poetry. It paved the way for music and passion subsequently developed by SYDNEY and SPENSER. Wyatt’s poems were short but fairly numerous. They were for the most part, translations and imitations both of Italian poetry, specially the love sonnet. Wyatt’s love sonnets ninety six (96) in all were published posthumously in 1557 in “TOTTLE’S MISCELLANY”. These love sonnets of Wyatt paved the way for the love sonnets of SIDNEY and SPENSER. In them the fire of love burned with a glow, and it was to the credit of WYATT that he imparted emotion and passion, fervor and enthusiasm to English poetry. In these sonnets we hear for the first personal note in poetry was introduced by this poet.

HENRY HOWARD, EARL OF SURREY (1517-47):

SURREY, HENRY HOWARD, the poet was son of Thomas Howard. His work consists of sonnets and miscellaneous poems in various meters, notable for their grace and finish. He credited with Wyatt the merit of bringing the sonnets from Italy into England. He gave up the Petrarchan model popularized by Wyatt and prepared the ground of Shakespearean sonnet of three quatrains followed by a couplet.

“In the development of English Verse”, says E.ALBERT, “Surrey represents a further stage a higher political faculty increased ease and refinement and the introduction of two metrical forms of capital importance- the English form of the sonnets and blank verse.” Surrey does not have Wyatt’s energy and independence but he is more graceful and sensitive and greater artist than Wyatt. His sonnets were grounded in love and were written to Geraldine or Lady Elizabeth Fitzgerald. They were characterized by emotional flights of imagination marked by an elegiac note. Side by side, we notice in them a genuine love for nature seen earlier in Chaucer’s Poetry. He combined love and nature in his personal sonnets, and gave them the impress of his personality. Surrey also composed impersonal sonnets characterized by satirical touches to contemporary personages. He was the first English poet to use ‘Blank-Verse’ in his translation of the two books of the “AENIED”.

“TOTTEL’S MISCELLANY” was published in 1557, a date which marks the public beginning of modern English Poetry. It contained the poems of Wyatt, SURREY and several of their followers. It is a collection of some three hundred (300) lyrics, songs and sonnets.

In addition to these poets there are poets like THOMAS SACKVILLE, GEORGE GASVOIGNE, DANIEL and MICHEK DRYTEN, who their own way have made notable contribution to Elizabethan Poetry.

THOMAS SAKVILLE (1536-1608):

In bulk Sackville's poetry does not amount so much, but in merit it is of much consequence. He is the author of two significant works, "THE MIRROR OF MAGISTRATES" and "INDUCTION". Both are composed in the rhyme royal stanza, are melancholy and elegiac in spirit and archaic in language, but have a severe nobility of thought and grandeur of conception and of language quite unknown since the days of Chaucer. His "THE MIRROR OF MAGISTRATES" is a powerful picture of the under world where the poet describes his meeting with famous English men who had suffered misfortune. "INDUCTION" is more powerful than "The Mirror Of Magistrates". It is written in seven line stanzas (ababbcc) which Chaucer had used with ease and grace.

SIR PHILIP SYDNEY (1554-1586):

Philip Sydney was the chief of an elegant coterie and exercised an influence which was almost supreme during his short life. He was the most commanding literary figure before the time of Spenser and Shakespeare. Like the best of the Elizabethans, Sydney was successful in more than one branch of literature, but of his works was published after his death. His first finest achievement in poetry was "ASTROPHEL AND STELLA" a collection of 108 love sonnets. It is a collection of songs and sonnets evidently addressed to one person. The sonnets of Sydney have passion for PENELOPE, who was by the time the wife of Lord Rich. The publication of "ASTROPHEL AND STELLA" at once caught the imagination of the people and gave rise to the vogue of the sonnet. Everybody tried his hand at it mostly of the Elizabethan sonnets. These sonnets which owe much to Petrarch and Ronsard in tone and style, place Sidney as the greatest Elizabethan sonneteer except Shakespeare. They reveal a true lyric emotion found in a language delicately archaic. Sydney is undoubtedly the greatest literary figure between WYATT and SPENSER.

EDMUND SPENSER (1552-1599):

It was Charles Lamb who called Spenser "the 'Poet's Poet' and in giving him that honoured title, the prince of English essayists was not wrong. Spenser is regarded as the 'poet's poet' and the 'second father of English Poetry'. Chaucer being the father because Spenser rendered incalculable service to English poetry in a variety of ways and left behind him models of poetic excellence to be imitated and followed by a host of poets who came in his wake. In Spenser's poetry we have the best and the finest qualities that are generally associated with good and great poetry, and in a way are spread over in the works of subsequent poets. The poetic faculty in Spenser is so abundantly and predominantly present that we cannot think of any other poet save Spenser to occupy the pride of place among English poets.

The main poetical works of Spenser are "Shepherd's Calendar", "The Four Hymns", "Mother Husband's Tale", "The Complaints", "The Amoretti", "The Epithalamion" and the masterpiece "The Faerie Queene". 'The Faerie Queene' is a great work on which Spenser's fame rests. The original plan of the poets included 24 books, each of which was to recount the adventure and triumphs of a knight who represented moral Virtue. The plot of the poem is rather complicated and obscure. But the main aim of the poet becomes moral edification through and allegorical device. Externally, "The Faerie Queene" has the plot of an epic and internally it is rich in pictorial qualities, music, and wonderful rich imagination. "The Faerie Queene" is really the masterpiece of Spenser.

All these poets and their contributions clearly show how there were three categories of poets— Sonneteers, Lyricists, and narrative poets. Sonnet for the first time in England was introduced by Wyatt and Surrey in the first half of the 16th century. Later on SHAKESPEARE wrote about one hundred and fifty four (154) sonnets by making a slight alteration in the pattern. Most of the Elizabethan poets followed the Italian pattern of Octave and Sestet. But Shakespeare broke the sonnets into three quatrains, joined by a couplet. His 154 sonnets were first published in 1609, and as Wordsworth has put it, it was with this key that the poet “unlocked his heart”. It is in the sonnets alone that the poet directly expresses his feeling. Besides their sincerity of tone, they have literary qualities of the highest order. Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence is, “the castle which encloses the most precious pearls of Elizabethan lyricism. Some of them unsurpassed by any lyrist”.

Features of Elizabethan Poetry:

Elizabethan poetry is notable for many features, including the sonnet form, blank verse, and the use of classical material.

Elizabethan Sonnets:

Perhaps the best-known innovation of Elizabethan poetry is the Elizabethan, or English, sonnet. Thomas Wyatt, a court poet for Henry VIII, introduced the Italian sonnet to England, but Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, reworked it into its typical English form. Elizabethan sonnets are written in iambic pentameter and consist of 14 lines, often divided into three quatrains and a couplet. The lines rhyme using a scheme: abab cdcd efef gg. The first eight lines are called the “octet” and the final six lines are the “sestet.” Elizabethan sonnets often feature a turn, or “volta,” between the octet and sestet, where the material introduced in the octet is seen from a different perspective in the sestet. In some sonnets, this turn comes in the final couplet, such as in William Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130, *“My Mistress’ Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun.”* Elizabethan sonnets also appear in the drama of the time, such as at the beginning of “Romeo and Juliet.”

Blank Verse:

Although iambic pentameter had been used in English poetry since the Middle Ages, the Earl of Surrey used it in a new way in his translation of Virgil’s “Aeneid”: He left the lines unrhymed. This poetic form, called “blank verse,” has the advantage of freeing poets from the burden of rephrasing thoughts so that they rhyme and was held by some to be the purest approximation of natural human speech. In the Elizabethan era proper, blank verse was Shakespeare’s and Christopher Marlowe’s meter of choice for drama; it gave speech a serious, elevated tone, while leaving prose to be used for those with lower social rankings and for comedy. Blank verse **persisted in popularity far past the Elizabethan era, used by such notable works as John Milton’s “Paradise Lost” and William Wordsworth’s “Prelude.”**

Forming Present with the Past:

Although the term “Renaissance” wasn’t used until the 19th century, it accurately describes at least one feature of Elizabethan literature: It often perceived itself as giving “rebirth” to classical matter to usher in a new era of literature in English. This quality is perhaps most easily seen in its appropriation of the past. Sir Philip Sidney employs the conventions of classical poetry in his sonnets, such as his invocation to the muse in “Astrophil and Stella”: “Fool, said my Muse to me, looke in thy heart, and write.” Similarly looking backwards, Edmund Spenser’s greatest work, the epic “Faerie Queene,” is full of archaisms -- intentionally old-looking spelling or syntax, such as “ycelet” for “called.” He uses these to create the sense of an earlier, less spoiled realm in which he can set his allegorical history of England.

Conclusion:

Elizabethan poetry is notable for many features, including the sonnet form, blank verse, the use of classical material, but perhaps the best-known innovation of Elizabethan poetry is the Elizabethan, or English, sonnet. In the 18th century interest in Elizabethan poetry was rekindled through the scholarship of Thomas Warton and others. Virgil's Aeneid, Thomas Campion's metrical experiments, and Spenser's Shepherd's Calendar and plays like Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra are all examples of the influence of classicism on Elizabethan poetry.

Elizabethan age we can say that time was classical period and at also modern period. Well, it is Elizabethan age were very development period at also very reach powerful and classical period and after arise new period whole period had difference for others.

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