Elizabethan Poetry

- **Elizabethan age** was a great age of English literature. During this time the writing of poetry was the part of education among the educated people. That is why many books of poetry by different writers appeared during this age.

- The **Elizabethan era**, often hailed as a golden age for English literature, spanned Queen Elizabeth’s long reign from 1558 to 1603.

- This period saw many poetic luminaries rise to prominence, including **Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare and Elizabeth herself**. Elizabethan poetry is notable for many features, including the sonnet
form, blank verse, the use of classical material, and double entendres.

- The proper Elizabethan literary age began in 1579, but before that year, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Earl of Surrey made their poetic contributions.
- Sir Wyatt brought the sonnet form Italy and made it popular in England. He followed the tradition of the Petrarchan sonnet with octave and sestet.
- There was later changed into English sonnet style by Shakespeare, who divided the sonnet into three quatrains summed up by a couplet. The Earl of Surrey wrote the first blank
verse in English. The Elizabethan age produced many beautiful lyrics. One of the finest lyricists was Sir Philip Sidney.

**William Shakespeare as Poet**
The greatest dramatist Shakespeare was also a great poet of this age who wrote around 130 sonnets and they are very famous in English literature. He developed a new form of sonnet called the English sonnet or the Shakespearean sonnet, which rhyme abab cdcd efef gg. It is different from Petrarchan sonnet. Many of his sonnets refer to a girl, a rival poet and a dark-eyed beauty.

**Edmund Spencer**
Edmund Spencer was a famous poet who introduced the Elizabethan age properly. In 1579, he wrote The Shepherd’s Calendar, a poem in twelve books, one for each month of the year. His greatest work was The
Faerie Queen. Though it was planned to be written in twelve books, he could complete six of them. It is an allegorical work with three themes: a political theme, a moral theme, and a fairy tale. More than the story, this work is known for its magic feeling, wonderful music in verse, and the beauty of the sound. It is written in Spenserian stanza of nine lines, with the rhyme scheme ababbcdbcc.

Lyrics of the Elizabethan Age
The Elizabethan age produced many beautiful lyrics. One of the finest lyricists was Sir Philip Sidney, who was a courtier, statesman, soldier and a poet. His books of sonnets *Astrophel and Stella* was printed in 1591, after his death. Another great poet was Sir Walter Raleigh, who was also a soldier, sailor, explorer, courtier and a writer. Some examples of best Elizabethan
lyrics can be found in the plays of Shakespeare. His longer poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* are rather cold and without feelings. But the occasional lyrics found in his dramas are full of feelings and passion. The famous dramatist Marlowe has also written some fine lyrics.

**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.”
Shaping the 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
“yclept” 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.

Double Entendres

This discussion wouldn’t be complete without a mention of Elizabethan poetry’s great love of double entendres: words or phrases that have a benign literal meaning but also have a second connotation -- usually a sexual one. In Act 3, Scene 1 of “Hamlet,” for instance, Hamlet directs a polemical diatribe at Ophelia, and tells her, “Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a / breeder of sinners?” On a literal level, playgoers could interpret this line kindly: Hamlet is worried about Ophelia and wants to shelter her from the world and from men. But in Elizabethan slang,
“nunnery” meant “brothel.” So Hamlet simultaneously insults Ophelia. This ambiguity is in keeping with Hamlet’s madness -- whether feigned or not.

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