**Shakespeare, Spenser and Sonnet sequences of the Elizabethan Period**

The age of Shakespeare or the Elizabethan Age was one of the most prolific 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 Elizabeth the 1st (1558-1603) comprising the latter half of 16th century. It was an age in which the mind of the people was set free from the trammels of Medievalism, free of religious persecution, from fear of poverty and starvation and from the fear of foreign invasion. It was an 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 to other countries of Europe. The whole age was marked by rich poetic sensibility, natural appetite for learning, and literature and love for aesthetic faculties. 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, variety and splendour of its production, this period as a whole ranks as one of the greatest age in the history of world literature. Men like Spenser, Bacon and Shakespeare grew from boyhood to 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 restriction 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 analogies and logical connections. Even his imagery and rhythm are marshalled into argument.

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 Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare. It was Charles Lamb who called Spenser “the ‘Poet’s Poet’ and that honoured  title is perhaps the most apt for him. 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 other than Spenser to occupy the pride of place among English poets.

The main poetical works of  Spenser are “Shepherd’s Calendar”, “The Four Hymns”, Mother Hubberd’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 rich imagination. “The Faerie Queene” is really the masterpiece of Spenser.

The sonnet as a specific poetic genre was introduced in England under the impact of the Renaissance, during the great literary age under the rule of Queen Elizabeth. 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 154 sonnets by making a slight alteration in the pattern. Sir Thomas Wyatt, a scholar and diplomat, was the first to innovate the form in English from the Italian model of Petrarch. A good many poets were drawn to it and served to develop it in diverse ways. Of the great sonneteers of the age, Wyatt, Sidney and Spenser, and the great bard Shakespeare, were specifically remarkable for their contribution.

The Elizabethan Sonnet, prior to Shakespeare, is found to follow more or less the conventional pattern, as practiced by Petrarch. In the Petrarchan sonnet, a harmonious unity in theme, mood, imagery and versification is clearly perceptible to produce a single impression. This unity is a cardinal feature in the art of sonnet-writing. The theme of the Petrarchan sonnet is love; its passion and pain, desire and despair. The subject-matter of the conventional Elizabethan sonnet is the treatment of love, rather physical love, in its varied moods. Moreover, the sonnet has its especial technique which gives it a unique form. The Petrarchan form comprises the two unequal parts of Octave (eight lines) and Sestet (six lines) with specific rhyme schemes. Edmund Spenser holds a conspicuous position as an Elizabethan sonneteer. His sonnet series “Amoretti” is a significant addition to the great bulk of Elizabethan sonnet sequences. Spenser stands out as an innovator in sonnet-writing in his handling of the rhyme structure. Instead of the usual division of the sonnet into octaves and sestets, he has divided the sonnet into three quatrains followed by a concluding couplet. This pattern was first fashioned by Earl of Surrey. Spenser’s sonnet has, no doubt, five rhymes like the Petrarchan sonnet, but there is a novelty in the very pattern of his rhyme to secure a more effective melody. The last line of every quatrain is made to rhyme with the first line of the following quatrain. This generates a fluidity, resulting in the sensuous sonority of his verse. It feels as if one quatrain flows into another and creates a continuum.In the rise of the English sonnet, Wyatt, Sidney and Spenser are undoubtedly the greatest names. They molded the Italian form to suit the English diction and paved the way for the later master versifier, William Shakespeare, to compose his timeless sonnets.

Most of the Elizabethan poets followed the Italian pattern of Octave and Sestet. But Shakespeare broke the sonnets into three quatrains, followed 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 lyricist”.

William Shakespeare was an English poet, playwright and actor, was born on 26 April 1564 and died on 23 April 1616. He was married to a lady named Anne Hathway in 1582. He wrote during the reign of Queen Elizabeth the 1st. He is regarded as England’s national poet. He is called as the ‘Bard of Avon’ as he was born in Stratford-upon-Avon. After his marriage he wrote up a number of sonnets. At that time, his writings got a high point and high reach. Shakespeare in the meantime, started intermingling with nature and wrote several poems. He was a poet of nature and language. His works are mainly known for his love for nature. Shakespeare’s sonnets, published by Thomas Thorpe is referred to as the quarto edition. A second edition of Shakespeare's sonnets was brought out by John Benson in 1640.