

ENGLISH LITERATURE MADE EASY



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MEDIEVAL LITERATURE OR AGE OF CHAUCER (1343 AND 1450)

*(Time and tide wait for no man; People can die
of mere imagination- Chaucer)*

The Age of Chaucer is ever remembered among the reading public for its realistic portrait of medieval society and culture of England as a first significant land mark in the history of English language and literature. It heralded a new era of learning in England. The age had witnessed the remarkable growth both English language and literature. Chaucer is known as “the father of English language and English poetry” with his remarkable contribution to both and had given them a new channel of progress in the dominance of Latin and French languages in England. Chaucer’s age had also witnessed many social, political, and religious challenges.

Salient features of the Age of Chaucer

1. There was a strong dislike for the Papal or Church’s interference in life of nation, which had previously been rejected from moral authority and social prestige but later it suffered from corruption and superstitions.
2. There were strong nationalistic passions due to the 100 Years’ War between England and France among the English public.
3. There was also a charged atmosphere due to the Peasant revolution in England.
4. The emergence of Middle class as a strong social force which wished to change England from a feudal social set up towards a free society where men and women could exercise their individual whims and fancies without fear of the landlords.

5. There was a transition from the age of Medievalism to the age of Modernism. Geoffrey Chaucer was the night star of the former and the morning sun of the latter.
6. Another notable event of the age was the Black Death or plague that affected one third of the country's population. This affected the life of common people and the small business men as well as the cottage industries of the villages.

Growth of English language as a means of literary vehicle:

The age saw the emergence of the Standard English dialect for the first time in England after the long suffocation, as it had previously been curbed by the influence of French and Latin. The East Midland dialect became the accepted form of standardized English and the major vehicle of literature during this time.

The language saw the great achievement and expression in the masterpieces of Chaucer. French and Latin gradually replaced by English from the common and educated mass. Chaucer's use of language to describe the man and his place is embellished with beauty, simplicity and humour of English. The common examples from the daily life account details of blooming gardens in spring to unique human characteristics as we find in *Malgudi Days* of R.K. Narayan.

The English language glorified themes of beauty, vitality and the secular sentiments in literature. The age is known for its severe criticism of the established order and religion. Church's control over temporal affairs of common men was challenged during this period. There was a renewed interest in the common man's affairs.

The artists of the time explored medieval romance in their art and literature. Especially, the persons like Chaucer. The dramatic form became the prominent form of entertainment during the time of festivals. The dominance of historical fables and romance of medieval age were eschewed for more humanistic themes. It was a period of great social and intellectual movements as well as poverty, unrest, and revolt.

The Age had also experienced the adverse hours with the plague called the **Black Death (1336–1352)** as well as the growth of the scientific

temper and inquiry of human existence. It had also witnessed the criticism of the Church as well as the celebration of the common people. It is often regarded as the precursor to the Renaissance Movement and the Elizabethan age.

The Development of English Prose:

There was a remarkable growth of English prose in the hands of individual writers in the beginning of this age. Due to the ripening of the English language, the prose form had been experimented in literature. The Biblical translation of **John Wycliffe** is the best example of it. He is also known as '**the morning star**' of reformation in Europe. The prose writing produced during this time is both original and individual. There were also the experimental works like that of **Thomas Mallory's Le Morte D'Arthur (King Arthur)** and a desire to shed the grip of Latin as seen in demand for an English Bible.

The formation of allegory was refined in this period. There was a return of alliteration which had been replaced with rhymes in the middle ages. The prominent prose writers of Chaucer's age were **Chaucer, John of Treviso and John Wycliffe**. There was also a great influence of Scottish works like Barbour.

Development of English poetry:

The Age of Chaucer saw the birth of English Poetry. In Chaucer's age, poetry continued to flourish and assumed an unparalleled position. The most noted poets of this age were **Chaucer, John Gower and William Langland**. Spenser became the father of poetic diction as there was no poetic diction before this age. The poetry saw the amalgamation of religion, humanism and secular passions of the time.

The narrative and descriptive poetry were enhanced during this time period. **Chaucer** himself was known for his microscopic observations. He was sociable and loved mingling with people from diverse backgrounds as evidenced in his work; '**The Canterbury Tales**'. It is a collection of twenty four stories written in the form of narrative poetry. When was working in charge of Customs and Justice of the peace, he wrote this poem. The tales were written as part of the story telling session by the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury from

London to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. He had portrayed the ironic and critical characters of English society such as The Knight, the Miller, the Reeve, the Cook, the Wife of Bath, the Friar, the Clerk, the Merchant, the Squire, the physician, the Pardoner, the Priest, the Nun and others from different social fabrics. He holds mirror to the 14th century English life. It ridicules more of Church system of the time.

THE RENAISSANCE AND ITS IMPACT ON EUROPE

*(Art always penetrates the particular fissures
in one's psychic life- Stephen Greenbalt)*

The Renaissance is an intellectual movement. The word Renaissance means 'rebirth' (Re: again, naissance: birth). It is also defined as the rebirth of human spirit or reawakening of human knowledge after a long slumber of the middle age or Dark Age in the European context. This rebirth brought out a revival of interest in art, literature, culture and civilization of ancient Greece and Rome. Further it inaugurates the value of humanism in the world in the place of divinity.

With the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the conquest of the Turks, the precious land of Greece, most of the Greek scholars fled to Italy along with their precious libraries. The Italians who had only heard of the great names of Homer, of Plato and Aristotle, got an opportunity to satisfy their curiosity with the help of the refugee scholars. Then the treasure of ancient Rome was added the new and riches treasure of ancient Greece result in explosion of knowledge, what we call renaissance.

The renaissance was in full tide in Italy at the end of the 15th century which marked the end of the medieval ages. It introduced the great artists, poets and painters of Italy to the world outside such as Ariosto, the author of *Orland Furios*, a romantic poem, Tasso, with his epic *Jerusalem Delivered*, Leonardo Vinci, the great painter, and the sculptor Michelangelo, the famous the painter etc.

Renaissance spread to the Western Europe during the fifteenth century with the invention of printing convention by John Gutenberg of Germany and the printing machine by William Caxton. Renaissance movement made its humble beginning first in Germany, and then in France. It came to England during the last decade of the 15th century.

Features of Renaissance:

1. Basically Renaissance is an intellectual movement which encouraged for the growth of art, literature, culture and civilization of man.
2. Italy was the home of Renaissance as it was a centre of all learning. Petrarch and Boccaccio marked the dawn of Renaissance with the study of humanity and discovering the beauty in Roman antiquities, art and literature.
3. Renaissance leads to the growth of humanism which means the religion of humanity or devotion to human or secular interests as opposed to divinity. This new teaching of humanism brought the revolutionary change in the life and outlook of men. The age old conventions and religious practices were questioned for the first time. There was a shift from divinity or religion to the secular interests in man.
4. The renaissance made the people to value life for its own sake and not merely as a preparation ground for the next world or salvation.
5. Renaissance leads of the revival of interest in the study of ancient Greek and Roman literature and art. For the first time, the age old and forgotten manuscripts of Virgil, Ovid and Cicero fished out from musty library. They were valued as the works of humanity and rational thinking, because of the presence of love, of nature and the glories of ancient Rome and Greece in them. The Renaissance brought out a revolutionary change in the study of university and collages. The studies of scholastic philosophy, religion were replaced by the study of humanity.

Effects of Renaissance:

1. The Renaissance had given scope for the intellectuals to think scientifically and rationally in the universe as a result, the age old religious practices, conventions; superstitious beliefs were questioned through literature or speech. There was a growth of humanism in the place of strict religious dogmas.
2. The Revival of classical learning such as the literature of Homer, Vergil, Ovid, Aristotle etc. Homer, Virgil and Ovid were studied as books of revival of knowledge and new manuals of life and culture.

3. Many intellectual writers translated the ancient Greek and Roman writing in most of the European languages as to spread the outbursts of knowledge of Roman and Greek humanitarians.
4. Renaissance encouraged for the growth and development science and technology in the place of religion and divinity.
5. Encouraged for the discovery of new lands as Columba's discovered America in 1492 which widened the horizon of mind and fired the imagination of people.
6. Renaissance leads to the growth of human knowledge, the spirit of enquiry and free thinking.
7. The astronomical theories of Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler had changed the medieval concept of the universe and position of man in it.
8. The reformation movement lead by Martin Luther in Germany.

ELIZABETHAN LITERATURE

(Brevity is the soul of wit- William Shakespeare)

Introduction: Queen Elizabeth came to the English throne in the year 1558. Which was like the sunrise after a long night? She was a great patriot; she had a lot of affection towards England. She loved and enriched the culture and the historical heritage of England. She gave an ample scope for the growth of art and literature. So her age is compared with the age of Augustus in Rome and age of Guptas in India. Her age is considered as a golden age in the history of English literature.

Features:

1. Great passion for classical learning.
2. Abundance of output of literature.
3. Growth of Romanticism in poetry and drama.
4. Lyrical genius.
5. Dominance of drama or theaters.
6. Growth of Euphuism or ornate style.
7. Italianization.
8. Translations of classical literature.
9. Discovery of new techniques.
10. Nest of singing bird.

Elizabethan Poetry

Introduction: Elizabethan poetry is considered as 'the nest of singing birds'. Because; for the first time with effect of Renaissance the variety of English poetry has grown out of the fruits of Renaissance with the publication of '*Tottel's Miscellany*' the collections of songs and sonnets by Henry Howard, Nicholas Grimald and Thomas Wyatt, the court poets of Henry VIII, who inspired Elizabethan poets to compose subjective poetry with full of feelings and emotions. There was an outburst of English poetry in various manifestations.

Features of Elizabethan poetry

1. The growth of Narrative poetry.
2. Elizabethan poetry is marked by subjectivity and individuality.
3. Elizabethan poetry is basically romantic in nature.
4. It is marked by the expression of an individual soul.
5. It is satirical in its nature.
6. Elizabethan poetry is lyrical melodious and imaginative.
7. It glorifies freedom patriotism.
8. Growth of political, religious and moral allegory.
9. It is perfect, artificial and pedantic.
10. It is also marked by insincerity of conventionalism.
11. Lack of intensity and passion.
12. There is a mixture of art and humanism.
13. Lack of originality, full of melody and musical expressions.
14. Growth of sonnet as a powerful form of expression.
15. It is decorative, humanistic and appealing.

Elizabethan Poets and their contribution:

1. **Samuel Daniel:** He was the first poet to compose narrative poem among the Elizabethan poets with an historical theme. He was a poet laureate. He wrote a narrative poem called 'Civil Wars' in

1595 which deals with the themes of patriotism, realism which is all about the succession after the death of Queen Elizabeth who had no male heir to succeed her. Ben Jonson calls him as “a good honest man but no poet”. He was a prose writer in verse.

2. **Michael Drayton:** He was a realistic writer. His *Poly-olbion* is a long narrative poem. It poetizes the geography of England from one corner to another. He made the legend of every valley, river and hills of England. He wrote the poems in Alexandrine. (A stanza of 9 lines). His ‘*Barons war*’ deals with the war between Barons and Edward II.
3. **Christopher Marlowe:** He was the chief among the university wits. He was not only a poet but also a great dramatist. He was the pioneer in writing the licentious narrative poetry with the direct influence of Latin and Greek literature. His famous poem *Hero and Leander*, deals with the story of sensual and passionate lovers. Hero who is separated from her lover by the river. Hero lives in the church tower. She holds a lantern at night to signal her lover Leander to come for her at night. At one night Hero gets uncontrollable passion but at the moment the river was on the spate. She gives signal to Leander. Looking at the signal Leander jumps in the river and he has not noticed of the flood. As Leander swimming, he sweeps away by the current of water. Then Hero also jumps into water from the tower and becomes one with him in the death. This poem represents the physical beauty and loveliness of the female.
4. **William Shakespeare:** William Shakespeare has given remarkable contribution for the growth of English poetry besides his plays. He wrote songs, sonnets and narrative poems. *Under the Green Wood Tree*, *The World is the Stage*, *An Attribute of God* are the best lyrics of Shakespeare. He wrote 154 sonnets with varied themes. Besides, he is remarkable for his licentious narrative poems such as *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. They deal with the stories of passionate love full of bear hunting scenes and physical beauty of woman.
5. **Edmund Spenser:** He is the champion of Elizabethan lyrics. He was the product of Cambridge University. He wrote poetry with the spirit of Renaissance. The appearance of his *Shepherd’s*

Calendar in 1579 opened a new epoch in English poetry which is a long narrative pastoral poem consisting of 12 sections, each describes one month of a year. It deals with the theme of rural life, nature and love. It is written in artistic language with national characters. It has the beauty splendor imagination, moral seriousness and idealism.

His *The Fairy Queen* is an allegorical poem, which is considered as a romantic epic. It is written to glorify Queen Elizabeth and her court. It was planned to write in 12 sections but Spenser could hardly complete 6 sections and left it incomplete. Here twelve knights of the King Arthur represent 12 moral values. It is both political and moral allegory.

His *Astrophel* is a pastoral elegy on the death of Sir Philip Sidney, is in the form of allegory. He published all his sonnets entitled *Amoretti*. His *Epithalamion* or *Bridal ode* is a true lyrical poem which is unsurpassed for its graceful feeling and haunting melody. Besides he wrote *The Focus Hymns the love and Beauty* in praise of his youthful earthly love and beauty. He invented a poetic stanza known as 'Spenserian Stanza', which consists of nine lines rhyming ababbcbcc, which is one of the crowing achievements of poetical inspiration.

6. **Sir Philip Sidney:** Came from a royal family, the perfect gentleman, a polished courtier and finished scholar. He wrote the sonnet series *Astrophel and Stella*, a verse in prose romance *Arcadia* and a critical treatise *Apology for poetry*, his poems are marked by sincerity of expression and beauty of form.

The sonnet sequence:

The Sonnet and Sonneteers: The word 'sonnet' is derived from Italian word 'Sonnetto', which means 'a little sound' or 'song'. It is a short poem of 14 lines. Petrarch was the inventor of this poem in Italy. It was introduced into English Literature by the two political diplomats. Thomas Wyatt and Earl of Surrey during the time of Renaissance modified the sonnet and together published their sonnets in *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1556. After its introduction most of the English poets published their sonnets in sequence such as Fluke Greville's *Caelia*, Samuel Daniel's *Delia*, Michael Drayton's *Idea*, Spenser's *Amoretti*, Constable's *Diana* and Shakespeare's *154 sonnets*.

Features of Elizabethan sonnets:

1. They appear in sequence.
2. They are artificial, written only for the sake of fashion.
3. Imitated Petrarch in poetic convention.
4. They generally deal with a theme of love either for married or unmarried lady.
5. They are marked by excessive imagination, music and melody.
6. They are full of desire and passion.

The sonnet writers:

1. **Sir Philip Sidney:** He published his sonnet sequence called *Astrophel and Stella* which deals with his passion for Penelope who was very much disappointed by her love and passion that fired the imagination of people and became very popular form of poetry.
2. Edmund Spenser published his sonnet sequence in the Italian name *Amoretti*, which consists of 88 sonnets. They express his love and courtship of Elizabeth Boyle, who became his wife later on. They are marked by the poets haunting desire, passion.
3. **William Shakespeare:** Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets which were published in 1609 as words worth puts it was with the publication of his sonnets Shakespeare unlocked his heart. His sonnets are marked by high imagination, lyricism and melody. They are of personal as well as impersonal in style. Some are addressed to a friend, a handsome young man of rank and wealthy i.e. the friend who is popularly identified with Shakespeare Earl of Southampton and some to a dark-haired lady.
4. **Daniel** wrote his *Delia* a sonnet sequence in straight forward and crisp diction.
5. Drayton's *Idea* published with vigorous sonnets which express poet's bold love for his beloved as 'Since there is no help, come, let us kiss and part'.
6. Henry Constable's *Diana* consisting of the charm of delicate fancy and scholarly elegance.

Elizabethan Drama

Introduction: Drama may be defined as an articulate story presented in action, which deals with human conflicts. It is presented on the stage in presence of the audience by means of dialogue.

The Brief history of English Drama:

The history of English drama takes us back to the time of Norman Conquest. In the beginning Latin and Greek dramas were performed in the honour of *St. Katherina* during the religious festivals. 'The Cradle of drama' brought to England during the time of Renaissance. It was confined only to the church and clergymen, dealt with themes of Christianity. They were known as 'mysteries' or 'miracles' to represent serious actions. Later on the *Morality* plays came into existence. In this regard we have John Heywood's *Four Ps.* Later on Thomas Sackville and Norton brought out full fledged tragedy called *Gorboduc* which was followed by the full fledged comedy Gammer Gorton's *Needle*.

In the year 1576 the first theatre was built up and by the close of the 16th century Eight more theatre were constructed on the banks of the river Thames. The strong national taste of the English public, demanded romantic plays. So the university scholar brought out wonderful plays.

Causes for the popularity of drama during Elizabethan period:

1. Drama became the source of entertainment.
2. It was the best form to express national sentiments.
3. Dramas served as the best plot form to express the romantic sentiments, feelings and heroism.
4. The best source of income.
5. Helpful to please the kings and queens with the scenes of war, love, adventure etc.

A. University wits or Pre Shakespearean Dramatists

A band of English dramatists like Christopher Marlowe, George Peel, Robert Greene, Thomas Nash, Thomas Lodge and Thomas Kyd cultivated

the English drama before Shakespeare. They were young graduates of Oxford or Cambridge University. So they are called 'University Wits' most of these writers were the great scholar either in Greek or in Latin literature. They enriched the English plays with their remarkable contribution. All these playwrights share the common features. They prepared plain ground for Shakespeare to cultivate English drama.

Feature of their plays:

1. Dominated with heroic themes.
2. Marked by long speech, violent incidents, emotions, bloodshed etc.
3. Written in blank verse and heroic style.
4. Most of the plays were tragic in tone.
5. Influenced by the Senecan tragedy of horror, murder and bloodshed etc.

The University wits:

1. **John Lyly (1154–1606)** wrote number of artistic and refined courtly plays which deal with the fashionable lords and ladies of the court. Most of them are comedies such as *Compasp*, *Endymion*, *Lover's Metamorphosis*, and *the Woman in the Moon*. He was the first to use prose as a medium for drama. He influenced Shakespeare in writing witty dialogues to his comedies.
2. **George Peele (1558–98):** He wrote only one country play known as *The oldwives Tale* which is marked by poetic qualities of high order.
3. **Robert Greene (1560–92):** He was the best among university wits. He laid the foundation for English comedies with his *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*. 'Margaret' is the heroine of the play who represents a real English country girl.
4. **Thomas Kyde (1558–94):** He was a university scholars and a law student, wrote a tragedy in the model of Seneca known as *The Spanish Tragedy*, which is full of horror, terror, gloom bloodshed and crimes which inspired Shakespeare to write his famous tragedies like *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* etc.

5. **Thomas Nash (1567–1601)** was a Cambridge graduate. He was a born journalist. He wrote *The unfortunate Traveler* in prose style.
6. **Thomas Lodge (1558–1625):** He was a Oxford graduate. He worked with Shakespeare in writing the plays. He wrote a romantic play called *Rosalynde* which inspired Shakespeare to write his *As you like it*.
7. **Christophe's Marlowe:** He was born at Canterbury and educated from Cambridge. He was a professional dramatist. He died young at the brawl. He wrote, *Tamburlaine the Great*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Dr. Faustus*.

Dr. Faustus is a romantic tragedy which deals with the over ambition of a university graduate of Wittenberg who after learning all the faculty of knowledge in the world, wishes to study black art and sells his soul to the devils and finally regrets for it and dies. There is the artistic and poetic unity in his plays. He is the first man to use blank verse in English. There is sensuous richness varying emotion. He has been justly called *the father of the English drama* who marked the end of medieval plays and beginning of the Renaissance drama.

Contribution of University Wits: Most of the university wits were basically scholars and actors. They were genius in stage craft. They gave modern touch to the medieval plays by rejecting the convention.

1. Violated classical conventions like the unity of place, time and action.
2. Violent actions like fighting, bloodshed murder was freely shown on the stage.
3. Comic and tragic actions were separated.
4. Brought out the national English drama.
5. Given importance to the common audience.
6. Brought out refined dialogues.
7. Introduce woman character on the stage.
8. Brought out unity in plot and characterization.
9. They imparted poetic grace and refinement to English plays.
10. Brought out change in the medieval concept of tragedy.

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