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Reference

- * Text book on History of English Literature
- * www.bdtips.com and other websites

UNIT-1

FROM RENAISSANCE TO SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION

Social Background of the Renaissance Age

The **Renaissance** is a period from the 14th to the 17th century, considered the bridge between the middle ages and Modern history. It started as a cultural movement in Italy in the Late Medieval period and later spread to the rest of Europe.

The word ‘renaissance’ is a French word which means ‘rebirth’. The people credited with beginning the Renaissance were trying to recreate the classical models of Ancient Greek and Rome. The Renaissance period was the succeeding epoch of the middle ages which was the gap defining the classical and modern period. Often branded as the Dark Ages, the medieval period was characterized by some years with famine and pandemics such as the Black Death.

The *Renaissance Period* in English literature is also called the *Elizabethan Period* or the *Age of Shakespeare*. The middle Ages in Europe were followed by the Renaissance. Renaissance means the Revival of Learning, and it denotes in its broadest sense the gradual enlightenment of the human mind after the darkness of the Middle Ages.

Political Summary:

- In the age of Elizabeth all doubts seems to vanish from English History.
- After the reigns of Edward and Mary, the accession of a popular sovereign was like the sunrise after a long night.

- In Milton's words, we suddenly see England, "a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks."
- Elizabeth, with all her vanity and inconsistency, steadily loved England and England's greatness; and that she inspired all her people with the unbounded patriotism which exults in Shakespeare, and with the personal devotion which finds a voice in the Fairy Queen.
- Under her administration the English national life progressed by gigantic leaps rather than by slow historical process, and English literature reached the very highest point of its development.

Characteristics of the Elizabethan Age

1. Religious Toleration

- The most characteristic feature of the age was the comparative religious tolerance.
- The frightful excesses of the religious war known as the Thirty Years' War on the Continent found no parallel in England.
- Upon her accession Elizabeth found the whole kingdom divided against itself; the North was largely Catholic, while the southern counties were as strongly Protestant.
- Scotland had followed the Reformation while Ireland remained true to its old religious traditions,
- Both countries were openly rebellious.
- Elizabeth favoured both religious parties, and Catholics and Protestants acted together as trusted counsellors of a great sovereign.
- The defeat of the Spanish Armada established the Reformation as a fact in England,
- Reformation began, to settled the mind of man, freed from religious fears

2. Social contentment.

- It was an age of comparative social contentment, in strong contrast with the days of Langland.
- The rapid increase of manufacturing towns gave employment to thousand
- Increasing trade brought enormous wealth to England,
- The increase of wealth, the improvement in living, the opportunities for labour, the new social content—these also are factors which help to account for the new literary activity.

3. Enthusiasm.

- It is an age of dreams, of adventure, of unbounded enthusiasm springing from the new lands of fabulous riches revealed by English explorers.
- Drake sails around the world, shaping the mighty course which English colonizers shall follow through the centuries;
- Young philosopher Bacon is saying confidently, “I have taken all knowledge for my province.”
- The mind must search farther than the eye; with new, rich lands opened to the sight, the imagination must create new forms to people the new worlds.
- Hakluyt’s famous Collection of Voyages, and Purchas, His Pilgrimage, were even more stimulating to the English imagination.
- Her poets are creating literary works that are young forever.

Marston writes: “Why, man, all their dripping pans are pure gold. The prisoners they take are fettered in gold; and as for rubies and diamonds, they goe forth on holydays and gather ‘hem by the seashore to hang on their children’s Coates.”

- Cabot, Drake, Frobisher, Gilbert, Raleigh, Willoughby, Hawkins,—a score of explorers reveal a new earth to men's eyes, and instantly literature creates a new heaven to match it.

Elizabethan Drama

During the Renaissance Period or the Elizabethan Period, as it is popularly called, the most memorable achievement in literature was in the field of drama. One of the results of the humanist teaching in the schools and universities had been a great development of the study of Latin drama and the growth of the practice of acting Latin plays by Terence, Plautus and Seneca, and also of contemporary works both in Latin and in English. These performances were the work of amateur actors, school boys or students of the Universities and the Inns of Court, and were often given in honour of the visits of royal persons or ambassadors. Their significance lies in the fact that they brought the educated classes into touch with a much more highly developed kind of drama, than the older English play. About the middle of the sixteenth century some academic writers made attempts to write original plays in English on the Latin model. The three important plays of this type are Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister*, John Still's *Grummar* Gurton's *Needle*, and Thomas Sackville's *Gorbuduc or Ferrex and Porrex*—the first two are comedies and last one a tragedy. All these plays are monotonous and do not possess much literary merit.

The second period of Elizabethan drama was dominated by the “University Wits”, a professional set of literary men. Of this little constellations, Marlowe was the central sun, and round him revolved as minor stars, Lyly, Greene, Peele, Lodge and Nash.

Social Background of the Age of Reformation

Queen Mary I, the monarch of England and Ireland since 1553, dies and is succeeded by her 25-year-old half-sister, Elizabeth.

The two half-sisters, both daughters of King Henry VIII, had a stormy relationship during Mary's five-year reign. Mary, who was brought up as a Catholic, enacted pro-Catholic legislation and made efforts to restore the pope to supremacy in England. A Protestant rebellion ensued, and Queen Mary imprisoned Elizabeth, a

Protestant, in the Tower of London on suspicion of complicity. After Mary's death, Elizabeth survived several Catholic plots against her; though her ascension was greeted with approval by most of England's lords, who were largely Protestant and hoped for greater religious tolerance under a Protestant queen. Under the early guidance of Secretary of State Sir William Cecil, Elizabeth repealed Mary's pro-Catholic legislation, established a permanent Protestant Church of England, and encouraged the Calvinist reformers in Scotland.

In foreign affairs, Elizabeth practiced a policy of strengthening England's Protestant allies and dividing her foes. Elizabeth was opposed by the pope, who refused to recognize her legitimacy, and by Spain, a Catholic nation that was at the height of its power. In 1588, English-Spanish rivalry led to an abortive Spanish invasion of England in which the Spanish Armada, the greatest naval force in the world at the time, was destroyed by storms and a determined English navy.

With increasing English domination at sea, Elizabeth encouraged voyages of discovery, such as Sir Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the world and Sir Walter Raleigh's expeditions to the North American coast.

The long reign of Elizabeth, who became known as the "Virgin Queen" for her reluctance to endanger her authority through marriage, coincided with the flowering of the English Renaissance, associated with such renowned authors as William Shakespeare. By her death in 1603, England had become a major world power in every respect, and Queen Elizabeth I passed into history as one of England's greatest monarchs.

Impact of Renaissance on English Literature

Introduction

The Renaissance is an event that drew a clear line between medieval and the modern world. The Renaissance brought innovation to English literature which was mainly concentrated on mystery plays that were religious in nature. Shakespeare's plays, written during the Renaissance, are the commentaries and a reflection of the Renaissance's emphasis on humanism. For example, Hamlet includes the theme of the father – son relationship, guilt and some others. Hudson said – The Renaissance aroused the intellect and the aesthetic faculties.

In a broader sense Renaissance was the beginning of intellectual movement. Renaissance is greatly applied to the revival of arts, literature and education in Europe under the influence of Greek and Latin.

Origin of Renaissance

Renaissance is derived from the Italian *Renescentia* means rebirth. The French historian Jules Michelet used Renaissance for the first time. Italy was the cradle of Renaissance. It began in Italy in the 14th century, spread to England by 16th century, and ended in the mid – seventeenth century. And also, the term Humanism sprang from it.

Meaning of Renaissance

The Renaissance means rebirth. The French historian Jules Michelet used the word for the first time. Renaissance means –The discovery of the world and the discovery of man, by man. In other words, it was a psychological revolution which took place in European society. Renaissance is sometimes known as the revival of learning.

The Effect of Renaissance on English Literature

The impact of the Renaissance on English Literature is an increased willingness of writers to satirize existing works. The most significant impact of the Renaissance on English literature was seen in the changes of perception of human beings. For example, the words of Williams –

Now he looked inward into his own soul,

Seeking the meaning of experience in term of his free individuality.

The Renaissance brought about a new spirit in English literature in all its aspects. The thirst for classical learning also gave a new impetus to literature. All the forms of literature were developed during this period :

1) Impact on Drama

The Renaissance scored its first clear impact on English drama in the middle of the sixteenth century. During the Renaissance, drama became more secularized and reached crowning glory in the hands of University Wits such as Marlowe, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Among the University Wits, Marlowe has been called – “*The true child of the Renaissance.*” The heroes in his plays show an infinite desire for knowledge, wealth and power. Shakespeare introduced all the forms of drama. He wrote historical and romantic plays. His greatest achievement was in the field of tragedy. Ben Jonson introduced a new kind of drama known as comedy of humour. In his plays, the social evils and lust for money are shown that found in the English society. The tragic plays of blood and revenge were introduced by John Webster in this age.

Examples:

Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, Tamburlaine, Jew of Malta and Edward II, Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, King Lear and A Mid Summer Night’s Dream Ben Jonson’s Alchemist, Everyman in His Humour and Volpone. These are a few examples of the dramas of the Renaissance age.

2) Impact on Poetry

In Poetry, the spirit of Renaissance can be seen in the works of Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare and etc. this form became a fashionable and handy tool for the great poets of this age. Sir Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey were the pioneers of the new poetry in England. They both gave English poetry a new sense of grace, dignity and harmony. They did their best to imitate Italian Renaissance.

Wyatt has introduced the sonnet in English literature. Though in his sonnets Wyatt did not employ regular iambic pentameters, yet he created a sense of

discipline among the poets of the era. According to David Daiches –

Wyatt's sonnets represent one of the most interesting movements toward metrical discipline, found in English literary history

Surrey's works are characterized by exquisite grace and tenderness. He was a better craftsman and gives greater harmony to his poetry. Surrey employed blank verse in English literature with the translation of the fourth book of The Aeneid.

Examples

Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, Spenser's *Amoretti*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

With these few poetry of Renaissance era, England becomes a nest of singing birds.

3) Impact on Prose

Italian wind brought the seeds of the novel in English literature. The most important prose writers who exhibit well the influence of the Renaissance on English prose are Erasmus, Sir Thomas More, Lyly, and Sidney. In the 15th century, the prose writings of Bacon are true spirit of the Renaissance. He is called the father of English essays. His essays provided the best worldly wisdom in the era of Renaissance.

Examples

Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, Malory's *Morte – de – Arthur*, Erasmus' *Praise and Folly*, Browne's *Religio Medici*

Conclusion

The Renaissance makes a great effect on the development of English literature. In 1564, the Italian Renaissance was over but the English Renaissance had hardly begun. The age of Shakespeare was the era of Renaissance in England. It was an important movement that illuminated the whole English literature. Classical

language and learning were popularized. Paradise Lost is the last great triumph of the Renaissance.

RENAISSANCE FROM ITALY TO OTHER FOREIGN COUNTRIES

The growth of cities and the support of monarchs contributed to the spread of Renaissance ideas. The Northern Renaissance produced many great artists, writers, and scholars. Printing and the use of the vernacular helped to spread Renaissance ideas and increase learning.

The ideas of the Italian Renaissance spread to northern Europe. The Northern Renaissance produced its share of significant art, literature, and learning. The invention of the printing press helped to spread Renaissance ideas throughout Europe.

SILENT FEATURES OF RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance in English literature propelled poetry and theatrical drama to new heights. The Renaissance is a French word which means re-birth, revival or re-awakening. The Renaissance was both a revival of ancient classical mythology, literature and culture as well as a re-awakening of the human mind, after the long sleep of the dark Middle Ages, to the wonder, the glory and the beauty of the human body and the world of nature. “It was a re-discovery by mankind of himself and of the world.” In the words of the M.H. Abrahams Renaissance is “the birth of the modern world out of the ashes of the dark ages.” Renaissance began with the fall of the Constantinople in 1453. Mohamad -II, the sultan of the Ottoman Turks and a crusader defeated the Christians in 1453 and occupied Constantinople. It was the capital of Byzantine Empire and the center of classical learning. The scholars of ancient learning fled away to Italy and different other countries with their books and knowledge. They tried to spread their knowledge there. This revival of the classical knowledge is called Renaissance. Its salient features are— curiosity about more knowledge, desire for unlimited wealth and power, love of adventures, own

country, beauty, humanism and the past. Medieval aspects and argue that it was an extension of the middle ages.

Development of English Prose during Renaissance Period

English Renaissance developed later than in the other European countries at the end of the 15th century. ... It occupied the whole 16th century and part of the 17th up to the closure of the theatres in 1642. English Renaissance saw the renaissance of English literature especially in the fields of poetry and drama.

English prose of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has no “Casebook” or “Critical Heritage,” and there is no general account of the critical reception of the subject. But if the term Renaissance remains serviceable as a description of a literary period, then Sidney's *Arcadia*, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the writings of Bacon, Milton, and Browne, and above all the development of the English Bible, are clearly part of that cultural phenomenon. There are, of course, many studies of Renaissance prose written by and for specialist scholars, but little that can be offered to the student as a way into reading these rich but often challenging texts. So the present volume is designed principally to act as an

Introduction to some of the major figures and works in the field, though some of the essays will undoubtedly also be of interest to the specialist.

Any account of the critical reception of English Renaissance prose should probably begin with the Romantic Movement, since it is within that movement that the subject was constructed as a distinct entity and granted a literary status comparable with the achievements of Renaissance poetry and drama. In particular, it was Coleridge and his circle, whose enthusiastic rediscovery of the prose writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reversed (in Coleridge's view) “the common opinion that the English style attained its greatest perfection in and about Queen Anne's reign.” For Coleridge “the great models of [the classical style] in English are Hooker, Bacon, Milton and Taylor,” and while this style was “easily open to corruption ... it is the existence of an individual idiom in . . .

The University Wits

University Wits were a group of young dramatists who wrote and performed in London towards the end of the 16th century. They are called University Wits because they were the witty students of Cambridge or Oxford. They were all more or less acquainted with each other and most of them led irregular and uncertain life. Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Nash, Robert Greene, George Peele and John Lyly were the members of this group. Their plays had some common characteristics.

University Wits had a fondness of introducing heroic themes in their dramas. They often took it from the lives of great figures. They gave heroic treatment to the heroic themes. Their dramas usually had variety, splendid description and violent incidents. Their chief aim was to achieve strong and sounding lines. The best example was Marlowe, who is famous for his use of blank-verse. Again, the themes, used in their dramas, were usually tragic in nature. There was lack of real humor in their dramas. The only exception was Lyly. His “The Woman in the Moon” is the first example of romantic comedy.

• CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

Christopher Marlowe was perhaps the greatest among the University Wits. He was the only dramatist who was compared to Shakespeare even though he lacked the warm humanity of Shakespearean plays. Marlowe was fond of tragic in literature. He had no interest in comedy. Again, as a dramatist, he had some serious limitations, specially, in plot construction. His art of characterization was simple. His plays were one man show- they centered around one figure. Though he had some lacking, he was remarkable for being lyrical and romantic in his dramatic presentation of life. All his plays were poetic and artistic. “The Jew of Malta” and “Dr. Faustus” are two of his best works. These two plays clearly show Marlowe’s love for conventional Machiavellian hero.

• THOMAS KYD

Thomas Kyd is another important dramatist of the University Wits. He introduced the tradition of revenge play. We can easily find the influence of Kyd in the works of Shakespeare. “The Spanish Tragedy” is the best work of Thomas Kyd. This play had some outstanding features. The plot is horrific. There are murders, madness and death, but it earned a huge popularity for the play.

- **THOMAS LODGE**

Thomas Lodge was a lawyer by profession but he gave up his career and took literature as career. He wrote only few dramas. “Rosalynde” is the most famous of his romantic comedies. It is said that Shakespeare took the plot of his “As You Like It” from Lodge’s “Rosalynde”.

- **THOMAS NASH**

Thomas Nash was a professional journalist. He got involved in politics as well. His works had satiric tone. “Unfortunate Traveller” is his best work, which had much influence as far as the development of English novel is concerned.

- **ROBERT GREENE**

Robert Greene’s plays had a great contribution in the development of English drama. Although his art of characterization was weak and his style was not outstanding, his humor was highly interesting. His method was not very strict like the other tragedians of that time. He was witty, humorous and imaginative.

- **GEORGE PEELE**

George Peele was another important dramatist of the University Wits. His plays had romantic, satiric and historical evidence. He had no attraction towards the poetry. He handled Blank-verse with variety, and had a sense of humor and pathos. “Edward the 1st” was perhaps his best work.

- **JOHN LYLY**

John Lyly was another great dramatist who had a strong interest towards the romantic comedy. His comedies were marked by elaborate dialogues, jests and retorts. We can find his influence in Shakespearean comedies. “Midas” is one of the most important works of John Lyly which had shaken the development of the romantic comedy in English literature.

Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that University Wits have much influence in the history of English drama. Their dramas, specially the romantic comedies are of a great height. We can find their influence in later dramas of the Elizabethan period.