

THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

(1558 – 1603)

Literary Study Guide

*"This above all: to thine own self be true."
— Shakespeare*



OVERVIEW: Aligned with the NCERT Class 11/12 English Elective/Literature modules and Bihar SCERT Senior Secondary English curriculum, the Elizabethan Era represents the "**Golden Age**" of English Literature. Named after Queen Elizabeth I, this period marked the height of the English Renaissance, characterized by extraordinary national pride, maritime exploration, religious settlement, and unprecedented literary flourishing.

1. Historical and Social Background

- **The Tudor Dynasty & Reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603):** Elizabeth I brought political stability and internal peace after decades of religious turmoil following Henry VIII's break with Rome.
- **The Elizabethan Religious Settlement:** Re-established the Church of England via the Act of Supremacy and Act of Uniformity, creating a middle path (Via Media) between Roman Catholicism and extreme Protestantism.
- **Defeat of the Spanish Armada (1588):** England defeated the Spanish navy, establishing naval superiority, securing Protestant rule, and sparking immense national pride.
- **Exploration and Global Expansion:** Adventurers like Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh expanded horizons and enriched English trade and cultural imagination.
- **Intellectual Movement – The Humanism of Renaissance:** Influence of European Humanism, classical Greek and Roman learning, and print



2. Key Characteristics of Elizabethan Literature

- **Golden Age of Poetry and Drama:** Marked by exuberant vitality, creative experimentation, and mastery over blank verse.
- **Patriotism and Nationalism:** Literature reflected intense devotion to the monarch and pride in English language and identity.
- **Absorption of Foreign Influence:** Assimilation of Italian forms (e.g., the Petrarchan Sonnet), classical mythology, and Senecan tragic structures.
- **Lyrical Excellence & Musicality:** Songs, madrigals, and sonnets flourished alongside dramatic verse.

3. Development of Elizabethan Drama

Drama transitioned from medieval religious pageants to secular, highly sophisticated theater.

A. The University Wits

- **Christopher Marlowe:** Father of English Tragedy; introduced "mighty line" (blank verse). Key works: *Doctor Faustus*, *Tamburlaine the Great*, *The Jew of Malta*.
- **Thomas Kyd:** Pioneer of Revenge Tragedy. Author of *The Spanish Tragedy*.
- **Robert Greene:** Known for *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*; criticized Shakespeare.
- **Other Members:** John Lyly, George Peele, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Nashe.

B. William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

The pinnacle of Elizabethan drama, Shakespeare contributed plays spanning multiple genres:

GENRE	KEY WORKS / EXAMPLES	MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS
Tragedies	Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet	Tragic flaws, universal themes, psychological depth.
Comedies	As You Like It, Twelfth Night, A Midsummer Night's Dream	Mistaken identity, romantic entanglements, festival humor.

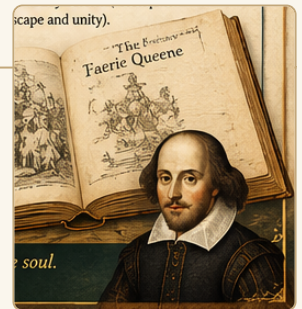
C. Elizabethan Playhouses and Performance

- **Public Theatres:** The Globe, The Rose, The Swan, The Curtain. Open-air, wooden structures with circular arenas.
- **The Audience:** Ranged from "groundlings" (standing in the pit for a penny) to wealthy patrons in covered galleries.
- **Actors & Conventions:** All male cast (female roles played by young boy actors); minimal scenery relying heavily on poetic imagery.

4. Elizabethan Poetry

A. Sonnet Sequences

The 14-line poetic form was brought from Italy by Sir Thomas Wyatt and modified by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey into the English/Shakespearean Sonnet structure.



- **Sir Philip Sidney:** *Astrophel and Stella* (First major English sonnet sequence).
- **Edmund Spenser:** *Amoretti* (Dedicated to his wife Elizabeth Boyle).
- **William Shakespeare:** 154 Sonnets addressed to the "Fair Youth" and the "Dark Lady."

B. Epic and Narrative Poetry

- **Edmund Spenser:** "The Poet's Poet." Authored *The Faerie Queene*, an allegorical epic celebrating Protestant virtues and Elizabethan ideals.
- **Sir Walter Raleigh:** *The Discovery of Guiana*.
- **Michael Drayton:** *Poly-Olbion* (description of British landscape and unity).

***"The Elizabethan Age gave England not only a literature, but a language of the soul.
– A Golden Age that still shines."***
