

# Literary Trends of the Elizabethan Age

Literature saw unprecedented growth and richness during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. It was the period of literary creativity and prolific writing. The spirit of Renaissance fostered literature, particularly poetry. The bleakness of the post-Chaucerian period was over and a new romanticism took over. The overall literary oeuvre of the period included a variety of prose and verse covering the aspects of platonic idealism, to romance to realism. Authors/ poets of this era came from all the classes that included courtiers to poor poets, university scholars to 'naturally learned' geniuses.

## *Elizabethan Poetry*

Elizabethan poetry is perhaps one of the richest poetry in terms of innovation in style and forms in the history of English literature. It had all the freshness and vigour of a youthful race. This period saw many poetic luminaries rise to prominence, including Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare and Elizabeth herself.

### **Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1516-47):**

These two poets were Italian travellers, and in bringing back to England the inspiration they had gained from Italian and classic models, they remade English Poetry. Their poems got published in Tottel's Miscellany (1557) posthumously. The collection is the first great landmark of early renaissance poetry.

**Wyatt** introduced Petrarchan sonnet in England with an octave of eight lines and a sestet of six lines with the rhyming scheme abba, abba, cde, cde. His imitations of Petrarch brought bold and new images into English. In his lyrics, Wyatt combines the sweetness, the simplicity, the

melody of medieval poetry as well as the grace and refinement of a man of learning and culture.

**Surrey** modified the Petrarchan form of sonnet adapting it to suit English ears. His sonnets were of three quatrains followed by a couplet with the rhyming scheme abab, cdcd, efef, gg. Shakespeare used this sonnet so adroitly that it came to be known as a Shakespearean sonnet.

Surrey was also the first poet to use blank verse in his translations of two books of Aeneid. Pinto remarks, "If Wyatt had the glory of bringing the sonnet into English poetry, it is to Surrey that we owe our great epic and dramatic measure of blank verse." All great poets – Marlowe, Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Collins, Wordsworth, Shelly and many others have been indebted to Surrey as far as the use of blank verse is concerned.

### **Important Concepts/Events/Terms**

**Platonic idealism** usually refers to Plato's theory of forms or doctrine of ideas. It holds that only ideas encapsulate the true and essential nature of things, in a way that the physical form cannot.

A **Sonnet** is a fourteen-line poem with a fixed rhyme scheme. Often, sonnets use iambic pentameter: five sets of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables for a ten-syllable line. Sonnets were invented by the Italian poet Giacomo da Lentini during the 1200s.

A **Blank Verse** is a poetry form written in the regular meter of iambic pentameter and unrhymed lines.

**iambic pentameter:** A line of verse with five metrical feet, each consisting of one short (or unstressed) syllable followed by one long (or stressed) syllable, for example, *Two households, both alike in dignity.*

